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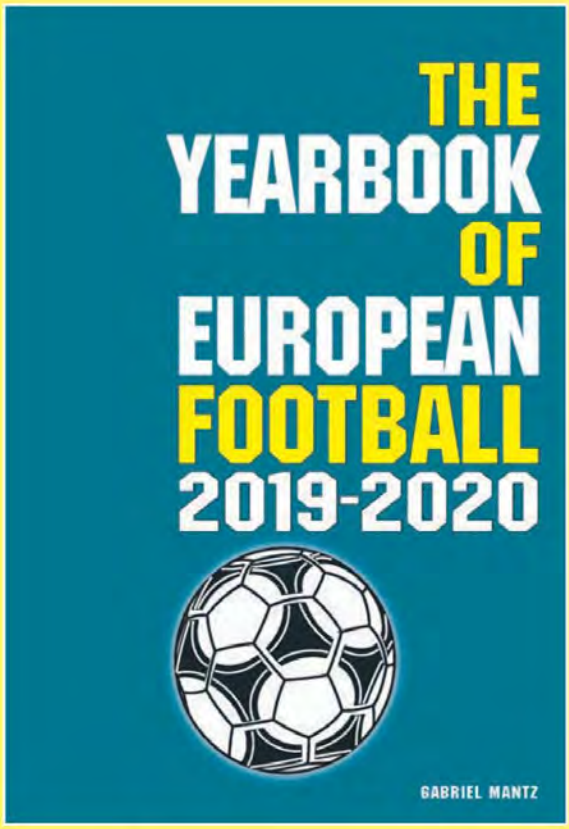

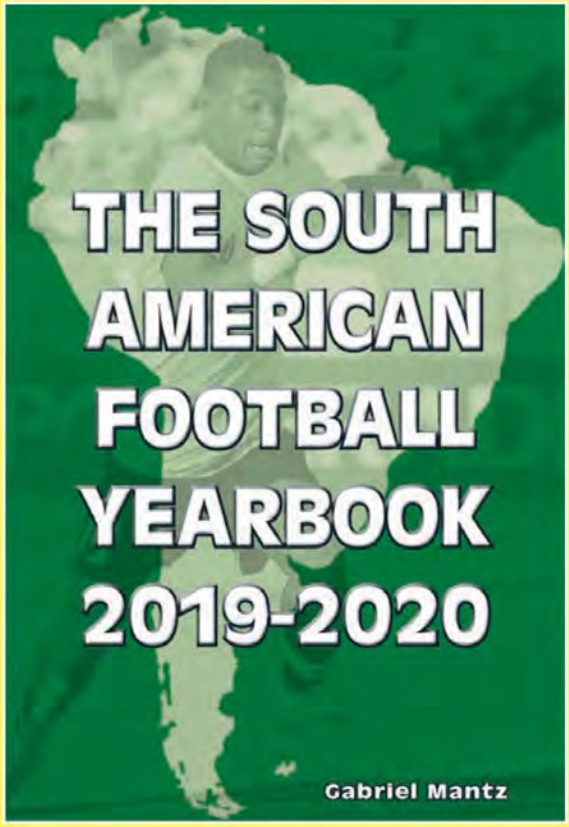

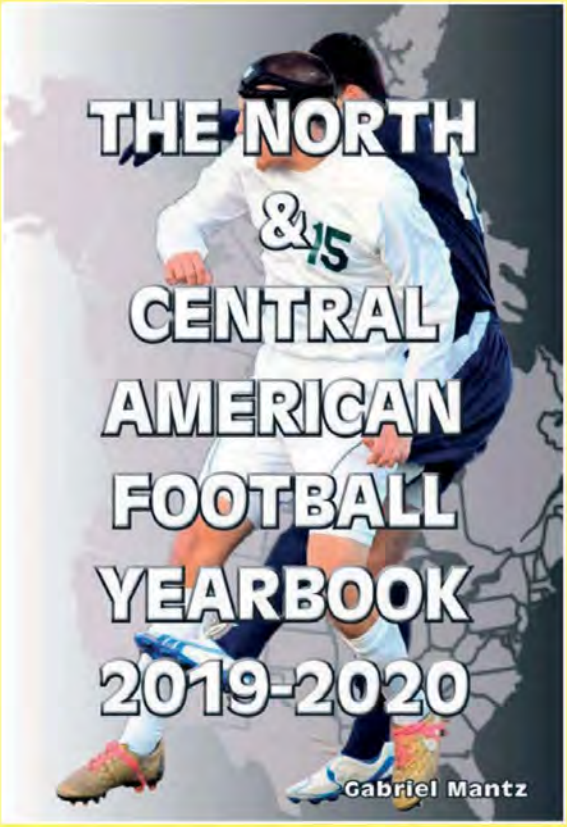

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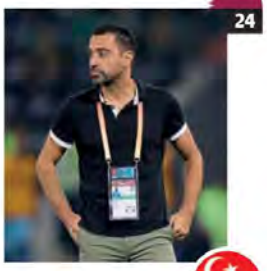

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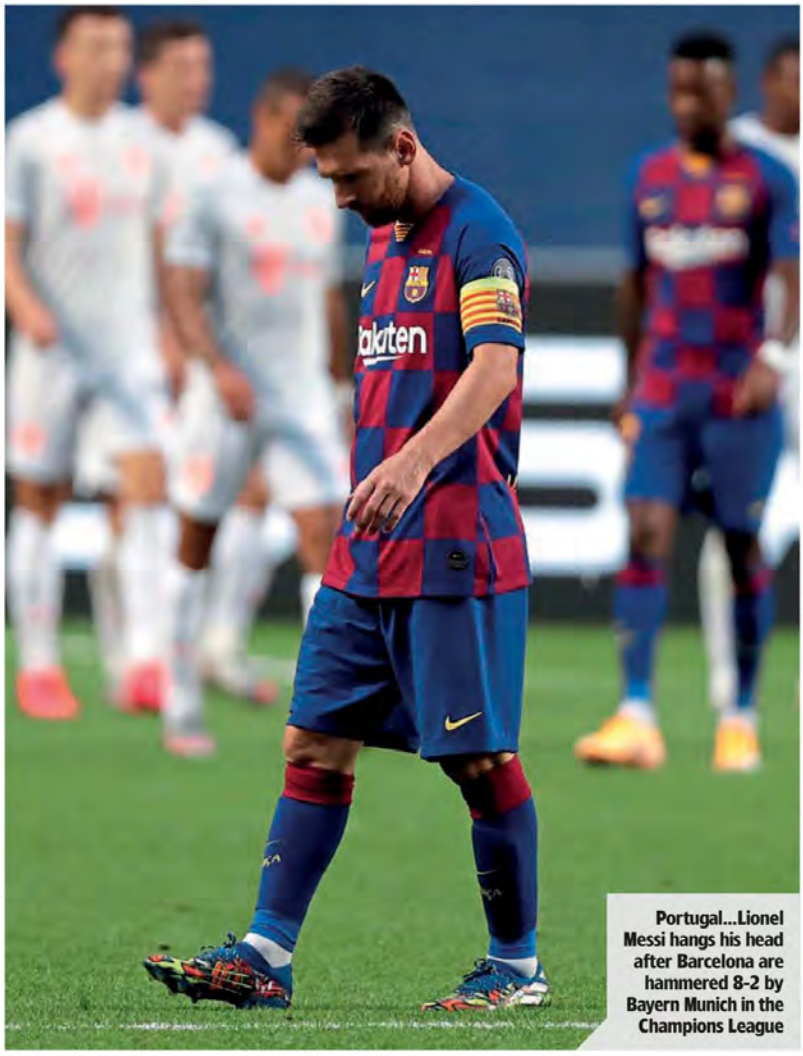
In Pictures

The global game caught on camera

Portugal...Bayern Munich defender Lucas Hernandez celebrates the 1-0 victory over Paris Saint-Germain in the 2020 Champions League final

England...a new mural of Liverpool captain Jordan Henderson lifting the Premier League trophy is unveiled next to Anfield

Mexico...staff attempt to clear a waterlogged pitch ahead of the game between Leon and Monterrey



Portugal...Lionel Messi hangs his head after Barcelona are hammered 8-2 by Bayern Munich in the Champions League

South Korea...fans return to stadiums in the K-League for the clash between Incheon United and Gwangju FC

China...the Workers' Stadium in Beijing, one of the 2008 Olympics host venues, is demolished as work to rebuild the ground begins

France...the final of the CAN des quartiers, an amateur football tournament in Paris

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FROM THE EDITOR

The "New Season" special issue is a regular edition of *World Soccer* I avidly looked forward to collecting as a reader, and after a 2019-20 season we will never forget – primarily for all the wrong reasons – it is nice to finally get back to some semblance of normality within the football calendar by compiling this 2020-21 edition.

After a condensed schedule to complete last season's campaigns, including the Champions League and Europa League "mini-tournaments" (page 70), within the blink of an eye, the 2020-21 season is upon us. But not everything is quite back to normal yet. The ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic are still lurking – we bring you comprehensive previews of 12 major European leagues (page 33) but some are already experiencing new postponements (Scotland, page 52). The usual money-spinning preseason friendly tours have been cancelled, impacting both club finances and transfers (page 58); the transfer window has been uniquely extended until October – although we round-up the biggest done deals (page 20); and major continental tournaments such as the Copa Libertadores (page 76) and Asian Champions League (page 80) still have lingering doubts over their futures.

> It is nice to finally get back to some semblance of normality within the football calendar

Nonetheless, there is still plenty to look forward to. Stars and clubs to watch, new signings and coaches, rising talents and big talking points are all covered in our European season preview. Plus, will Timo Werner (page 13) be a hit at Chelsea? Will the return of Arjen Robben (interview on page 62) be a success? Will VAR (page 14) finally improve? How does the UEFA Nations League work again? See our "explainers guide" (page 82). And what on Earth is going on at Barcelona? Their crisis is covered in depth in our La Liga preview (page 54).

In offering a comprehensive guide to 2020-21, this issue attempts to provide you with an answer to all of these questions and more. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as we've enjoyed putting it together.

Stephen Fishlock, Group Editor

Dream job...Koeman has always wanted to coach Barcelona

SPAIN

Barcelona turn to Koeman

Barcelona have appointed Netherlands manager Ronald Koeman as their new head coach following the dismissal of Quique Setien.

The club hierarchy wasted little time in the aftermath of their shocking 8-2 defeat to Bayern Munich, acting quickly on a clause in Koeman's contract which allowed him to join the Catalan club.

The new man will have a big rebuilding job on his hands. Club president Josep Maria Bartomeu recently announced that the entire first-team squad is up for sale, with the exception of Lionel Messi, Frenkie de Jong, Clement Lenglet, Marc-Andre ter Stegen, Antoine Griezmann, Ousmane Dembele and Nelson Semedo, as well as the brightest graduates from *La Masia*.

Koeman, who scored 88 goals in 264 games for Barca, including the winner in the 1992 European Cup final, becomes the latest in a growing trend of European clubs appointing former players as head coach, with Andrea Pirlo taking over the Juventus reins from Maurizio Sarri following the club's shock Champions League exit to Lyon.

Read more on page 54.

"There is negativity but we are the best team in the world…Bayern will be confident but they know they are not just playing against an ordinary team in the Bundesliga, they're playing against Barca"

Barcelona midfielder Arturo Vidal's pre-match optimism came back to haunt him following Bayern's 8-2 demolition job

ENGLAND

FA announce Phil Neville's successor

As well as losing their men's head coach, the Dutch FA (KNVB) were dealt a further blow with the news that the manager of their women's team, Sarina Wiegman, will leave her post to take over England women in September 2021.

Wiegman, who guided the Netherlands to the 2017 European Championship, beating England in the semi-finals, will remain in charge until the conclusion of next summer's Olympic Games in Tokyo.

FA chief executive Mark Bullingham said: "Sarina was the outstanding candidate from a very strong field. She is a proven winner and we are confident she can take England to the next level."

The KNVB are likely to focus on appointing Koeman's replacement before turning their attention to the women's next coach.

Runner-up… Sarina Wiegman applauds the fans after losing last year's World Cup final to the USA

HEROES & VILLAINS

Redemption…Lopetegui lifts the trophy

JULEN LOPETEGUI

In 2018, Lopetegui was sacked from two of the most prestigious jobs in the world within the space of five months – first Spain, and then Real Madrid. By guiding Sevilla to their sixth Europa League, he has reminded Europe of the coaching ability that made him so sought after two years ago.

BODO/GLIMT

The Norwegian side made an explosive start to the 2020 season, winning 12 of their first 14 matches and drawing the other two, averaging over three goals a game in the process. Glimt are chasing their first-ever top-flight league title after finishing second for the fourth time in 2019. No Norwegian team has ever finished runners-up as often without winning the Eliteserien, Norway's top flight.

MAROUANE FELLAINI

The former Belgium, Manchester United and Everton midfielder netted a stunning hat-trick for Chinese side Shandong Luneng. With his team trailing 1-0 to Dalian Pro in the 79th minute, Fellaini rose to the challenge, scoring three headers in just eight minutes to fire the title-chasers to victory.

ATALANTA FANS

After Atalanta reimbursed the fans who had bought tickets for their Champions League clash with Valencia in March, club's ultras arranged for the money to be given to a local hospital in Bergamo instead. In total, around 1,200 supporters donated €60,000 to the Papa Giovanni XXIII hospital, while ultras also sold T-shirts to pay for a new ambulance.

AU YEUNG WAI KAY

Reports have emerged that the businessman enquired about putting Wigan Athletic into administration before he had even completed his takeover of the club. The subsequent 12-point deduction cost the Latics their place in the English Championship, and they have been forced to sell many of their best players, with manager Paul Cook resigning in August.

ALEKSANDAR ANTONOV

The winner of the 2019-20 Fantasy Premier League was stripped of his title, following alleged offensive comments made about Raheem Sterling. Antonov, from Bulgaria, said on Twitter: "I am not racist…I would never say anything like that to a player with the intent to offend them. It's a small chat with friends, in a different language and different culture."

RUBEN SEMEDO

The former Villarreal defender was given a five-year suspended prison sentence and banned from visiting Spain for eight years after being found guilty of several crimes during his time in La Liga. The Portuguese centre-back, who is set to join champions Porto, was charged with offences including robbery, kidnapping, assault and possession of a firearm.

BOLI BOLINGOLI

The Celtic defender has been widely-criticised for a serious breach of Scotland's lockdown rules. Bolingoli took a secret day trip to Spain, failed to quarantine, then trained with the squad before playing against Kilmarnock, resulting in the postponement of two Scottish Premiership fixtures. Eight Aberdeen players were also fined after visiting a bar together, leading to two of them testing positive for COVID-19.

Disgraced…Boli Bolingoli

"It's nothing like La Liga. Defenders kick the s*** out of you and nothing gets given, they don't blow for free-kicks like they would in Spain. I don't know how that would affect Messi"

Gonzalo Higuain warns his international team-mate Lionel Messi against a move to the Premier League

Eddie NEWTON

(Trabzonspor)

2020 has been a roller-coaster ride for former Chelsea midfielder Newton.

The 48-year-old left Stamford Bridge in February to become Trabzonspor's assistant coach, but when Huseyin Cimsir was sacked for failing to win the title, he was hired on a caretaker basis. In only his second match, he oversaw a 2-0 win over Alanyaspor in the Turkish Cup final, which landed him the job full-time.

Newton spent eight years at Chelsea after returning as Roberto Di Matteo's assistant in 2012, but felt ready for a new challenge. He told *Sky Sports*: "I've been trying to become a number one for a while and felt there was more opportunity here. The figures don't lie – there are very few black managers [in England]."

Trabzonspor are currently serving a one-year ban from Europe for FFP breaches, so Newton will be able to fully focus on domestic success in 2020-21.

REINIER
(Dortmund – on loan from Real Madrid)
Real have entrusted Dortmund with the development of the 18-year-old forward on a two-year loan. They have previous when it comes to developing top talent.

ANGEL GOMES
(Boavista – on loan from Lille)
Manchester United's youngest player since Duncan Edwards, but only played 45 league minutes after his debut. Joined Lille when his contract expired and was immediately sent on loan.

MALIK TILLMAN
(Bayern Munich)
The latest in a very long line of exciting graduates from the Bayern academy, Tillman is comfortable in midfield or up front, and scored 13 league goals in 17 games for the Under-19s last season.

JENS PETTER HAUGE
(Bodo/Glimt)
The 20-year-old forward has been key to Glimt's flying start, scoring eight goals and assisting six in his first 12 games of the season. Linked with Man. United.

XAVI SIMONS
(Paris Saint-Germain)
Highly sought-after Dutch teenager who left Barcelona in 2019, Simons played his first senior game for Paris Saint-Germain in a friendly against Sochaux and has a bright future.

ROMELU LUKAKU
(Internazionale)
Although his own goal cost Inter the Europa League, he set a new record in the competition by scoring in 11 games in a row to reach the final. The run stretches back to 2014-15 and includes 15 goals.

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Timo Werner: Chelsea's new talisman

Look at the numbers, as any wise football fan does, and it's plain to see why Chelsea's £54 million acquisition of Germany striker Timo Werner is a move of thrilling potential.

He scored 28 goals in the Bundesliga last season for RB Leipzig. His overall record through four years at the club was 95 goals in 159 matches, as he became the club's record goalscorer.

Werner is only 24. These are fabulous statistics for a relatively young forward; beyond a surge of good fortune, far beyond a one-season dazzler who can be shackled when opposition teams work him out.

The stats are why Liverpool were also seriously interested in taking him to Anfield before the financial impact of the coronavirus pandemic prompted them to be cautious about transfers.

In the case of Werner, however, numbers are only part of the story. Look at his character and personality, and then you see why this move may be the most significant in the Premier League, and why it will transform Chelsea into credible title challengers.

Werner's career has been forged in the heat of cruel and sustained abuse from Bundesliga crowds over several seasons. Rarely in the history of the game has there been such a vicious and widespread campaign of hatred.

His crime was committed in December 2016 when the striker conned the referee with a dive to win a penalty he converted in a match against Schalke.

It was blatant cheating; he fell without contact from an opponent. But Werner is hardly alone in trying such tricks in a modern game where ethics have become an optional luxury extra.

The reaction was exacerbated by general dislike of RB Leipzig among German football fans, and created an imperfect storm for the player.

"Timo Werner is a son of a bitch" was a chant across stadiums in the Bundesliga, even at matches where RB Leipzig were not playing. They continued for two years.

It flared up even a few months ago when Hoffenheim owner Dietmar Hopp was the subject of offensive banners and chants, which even stopped a match against Bayern Munich.

Stuttgart ultras found another way to display their anger with a subsequent banner that read simply: "*Dietmar Hopp ist ein Timo Werner!*"

Most footballers would have wilted amid such intense personal hostility. Werner's resolve was implacable, his ambition only expanded.

"It made me stronger," is his verdict. "I don't think many strikers would have scored so many goals with the atmosphere so firmly against them."

He believes this mental strength came from endless football lessons as a boy from his father Gunther Schuh, a former professional himself.

"My dad would pass me the ball and I would take shots at goal," said Werner. "First it was the right foot, and we'd work on my technique on that. Then it was to my left foot. We even ran up mountains together. I learned quickly that to become a professional you always have to do more."

Perhaps all this explains why he is so nerveless in one-on-ones against a goalkeeper. Strikers say these are the hardest to score, but Timo has become a maestro of dinking the ball over the keeper or curling a shot past him.

No transfer is guaranteed to be a success, but the feeling here is that Chelsea have bought superbly well.

Along with his formidable mentality and shooting accuracy, Werner is genuinely two-footed and one of the fastest footballers in Europe.

"Turbo Timo" is his happy nickname, for sprinting 100m in just 11.11 seconds. He can play as a main centre-forward, on either flank or as a second striker, dropping deeper between the lines.

What is the vision of Chelsea boss Frank Lampard as he plots new seasons in the Premier League and Champions League? We will find out soon enough, but the team he is creating will surely be built to suit Werner's strengths.

The German will become as integral to Chelsea as Didier Drogba was a decade ago. He will end the club's long search for a true talisman striker.

Boy in blue... Werner's ready to make a big impact at his new club

The German will become as integral to Chelsea as Didier Drogba was a decade ago

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

VAR must improve in 2020-21

Sepp Blatter composed his most lugubrious expression, leaned forward meaningfully, gazed around the expectant quorum of reporters and admitted: "We are a laughing stock around the world."

The phrase has been re-coined more recently about the erratic and belated arrival of VAR in the Premier League.

But Blatter was speaking as FIFA president a decade ago, the day after witnessing Frank Lampard's infamous "phantom goal" against Germany at the 2010 World Cup.

There had been none of the "was-it-or-wasn't-it?" guesswork which surrounds England's third goal in the 1966 final against the same opposition; nor even the "did-I-see-what-I-think-I-did?" over Diego Maradona's "Hand of God" audacity for Argentina in Mexico in 1986.

Everyone in the Bloemfontein sun had seen Lampard's shot strike the underside of the crossbar and spin down behind the line. Everyone, that is, except referee Jorge Larrionda and his assistant.

No goal...VAR played its part in the post-lockdown Premier League

Platini was also correct: a mere eight years and two World Cups later, video assistant refereeing was imported at the 2018 World Cup.

VAR is often misunderstood. This is a different beast to goal-line technology, which is only about fact: the whole of the ball is either over the line or it is not. But VAR relies to a significant extent on subjective judgement.

> Pandora's box has been thrown open and all the little devils lurking around offside, handball, televisual lines and pitch-side screens have been cast into the worldwide game

It was to trigger a total change of heart for the head of FIFA.

Blatter's reversal was momentous because it destroyed the concept of universality; that all football should be played within the same basic conditions, from World Cup to pub league.

Embracing technology drove an irrevocable chasm between the elite minority and the grassroots majority.

Within two years, goal-line technology had been developed and approved. But, as Michel Platini forecast: "With goal-line cameras we will be on a slippery slope; people will want even more technology."

Of course, Blatter was correct to change his mind. But the pessimistic

Not that there is any going back. Pandora's box has been thrown open and all the little devils lurking around offside, handball, televisual lines and pitch-side screens have been cast into the worldwide game.

Surprisingly, considering the Premier League's symbiotic relationship with TV and the alacrity with which it led the take-up of goal-line technology in 2013, it was caught off-balance by the VAR revolution.

IFAB – with the four British FAs comprising half its members, remember – approved the start of worldwide VAR trials in 2017. Some 12 countries rushed in. But not England.

Such caution may have appeared wise as initial tales of confusion and complication erupted in Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Portugal.

Denied...Frank Lampard in Bloemfontein, 2010

These included a counter-attacking goal denied by an earlier VAR incident at the other end, mistaken identities, a team summoned from the dressing room at half-time after an over-extended VAR review and a VAR boss in Germany sacked midway through the season as the price for his referees' blunders.

English football dipped its toe in the waters in the 2017-18 FA Cup and did not like what it saw. Hence the Premier League waited until last season when it paid an exposed reputational penalty for having fallen behind the curve.

On the face of it, the margin for error should be minimal. Only four sectors of play are targeted: goal or no goal; penalty or no penalty; direct red card (not second yellow); and mistaken identity.

FIFA refereeing bosses Pierluigi Collina and Massimo Busacca have always insisted that VAR is only recourse for "clear and obvious" mistakes. But what is clear and obvious to the video referee is not clear and obvious to the live spectator.

Thus, chaos reigned over goals disallowed by the man in Stockley Park, who could zero in on a trailing finger or raised boot stud or armpit

all beyond the visual scope of the very match referee.

Officials sent out by Mike Riley, manager of Professional Game Match Officials Limited, were hampered by not only their own instructions but by the laws of the game themselves.

Concern about the time taken for a VAR decision saw them effectively barred from using the pitchside monitor. This meant the referee on the pitch was undermined by a colleague sitting often hundreds of miles away. That, in itself, is contrary to Law Five, which states:

"The decisions of the referee regarding facts connected with play, including whether or not a goal is scored and the result of the match, are final. The decisions of the referee, and all other match officials, must always be respected."

Not delegated to a video referee.

Certainly referees are ill-served by the absurdity of the current handball interpretation that varies between goal area and midfield. This is an example of the nonsense emerging from IFAB ever since it was saddled with advisory committees who seek to justify their own existence by needless meddling with the Laws of the Game.

No wonder FAs around the world struggle to find enough referees; no wonder confidence appeared, almost visibly, to be draining out of some Premier League officials as the extended season drew to its conclusion.

Hopefully, belatedly, lessons have been learned. It can only be good news that, now VAR is firmly established, its policing has been taken over by FIFA which possesses the authority to dictate uniformity of application.

Referees should demonstrate their authority by using the monitors while thicker analysis lines should reduce the tally of "armpit offsides". Accidental handball will be penalised only if it results immediately in a goal, not back in the build-up, and goalkeepers must be monitored on stepping off the line at a penalty.

These amendments will not defuse all disputes. As Collina and Busacca have always insisted: "VAR is only a tool to reduce the number of mistakes not eradicate them entirely."

Premier League VAR stats 2019-20:

Total overturns:	109
Leading to goals:	27
Leading to disallowed goals:	56
Penalties awarded:	22 (9 missed)
Pens overturned:	7 (1 for offside)
Pens retaken:	4 (1 from scored, 3 from missed)
Goals ruled out for offside:	34
Awarded after incorrect offside:	8
Ruled out for handball:	14
Allowed after wrong handball:	2
Red cards awarded:	9
Red cards overturned:	3

Fair play?

Laments that Financial Fair Play is dead in the water after the Manchester City case are way off the mark. The Lausanne-based Court of Arbitration for Sport overturned UEFA's imposition of a two-year ban on City for alleged breaches of FFP. Neither UEFA nor City emerged unscathed from the 93-page judgement. Questions remained unanswered over time-limited sponsorship cash while UEFA badly needs to close loopholes in its own regulations. The concept is fine – the application needs urgent attention.

Perfect choice

Jordan Henderson's election as Footballer of the Year was well judged by the English Football Writers' Association. Liverpool's captain led by example, both on and off the pitch, during the active season and during the pandemic lockdown. Kevin De Bruyne, Marcus Rashford and Raheem Sterling were also serious claimants. The Premier League is lucky to boast individuals of such quality – and three of them England players.

OBITUARIES

Hero...Hagen during his spell with Hearts at Tynecastle Park

David HAGEN (1973-2020)
The former Rangers midfielder started his career at Ibrox, and played in The Gers' treble-winning season of 1992-93. He also scored the winner for Falkirk in the 1997 Scottish Challenge Cup final and had spells at Hearts, Livingston, Clyde and Peterhead. Hagen was diagnosed with motor neurone disease in 2018.

Stephen TATAW (1963-2020)
Cameroon captain at Italia 90, where they became the first African team to reach the quarter-finals.

Fallen Lion...Tataw was a Cameroon icon

The right-back was one of the few Indomitable Lions who did not go on to join a European club, in spite of a trial at QPR. Instead he went to Asia after competing at the 1994 World Cup, becoming the first African to play in Japan. Also won the 1988 Africa Cup of Nations.

Mark Gleeson

Gabriel Ochoa URIBE (1929-2020)
The most successful coach in the history of Colombian football, winning 14 league titles – six with Millonarios, one for Santa Fe, and seven with America de Cali, whom he also led to three Copa Libertadores finals in a row, yet lost all three.

Tom FORSYTH (1949-2020)
After playing more than 200 games for Motherwell, Forsyth joined Rangers in 1972 and enjoyed tremendous success in a decade at the club. The centre-back won three league titles in Glasgow, including two domestic trebles, and scored the winner against Celtic in the 1973 Scottish Cup final. He also won 22 caps for Scotland, appearing at the 1978 World Cup, and earned the nickname "Jaws" for his aggressive style.

International...Forsyth made his Scotland debut in 1971

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Manchester City must overcome defensive frailties

The game that settled the 2019-20 Premier League title was a microcosm of the season. Manchester City played some extraordinary possession football. They moved the ball around in mesmerising patterns. At times, particularly in the opening quarter of the game, there was a sense of greatness about them, such that the thought Liverpool had a lead of more than 20 points felt vaguely incredible. And then Chelsea broke, Benjamin Mendy dived in and Christian Pulisic scored.

That's the way it was all season for City. They dominated games and struggled to create or take chances at times but, more especially, they were extremely vulnerable to quick counter attacks. Even in the second half at Stamford Bridge, as City equalised and began to assert pressure, Chelsea kept troubling them with balls in behind the back four. It's that, really, that was the difference between Liverpool and City.

Liverpool maintained the high standards of their 2018-19 season – indeed, through November and December probably exceeded them; City did not. After that game at Stamford Bridge, both Liverpool and City had played 31 games. At that point, City had scored eight goals more than Liverpool, but Jurgen Klopp's side had conceded 14 fewer (afterwards, with the title won, Liverpool's focus wavered). It's not in any way to downplay the excellence of Liverpool's attacking play to observe that the reason they won the title was the quality of their defending.

Which raises a vital question: pressing and preventing the counter has always been a key part of the Pep Guardiola philosophy. His Barcelona side were masters of it. They pioneered a number of aspects that have been so widely adopted they now seem basic. One player would go to the man with the ball, three others forming a ring around him to cut off passing options. If the ball wasn't won back within five seconds of it being lost, they would fall back into their defensive shape. It was so new, so ferociously acted that Alex Ferguson admitted his side had been bewildered by Barcelona's intensity both in the 2009 and 2011 Champions League finals.

Laporte...keeping the centre-back fit will be key to City's 2020-21 hopes

> Increasingly, Guardiola sides have proved to have a glass jaw. Get through the press and they can be exposed

Yet increasingly, Guardiola sides have proved to have a glass jaw. Get through the press and they can be exposed. That was brutally clear last season. With the ball, City were brilliant, which is why they scored four or more on 11 occasions. But without it they were badly flawed. Nine league defeats is a huge number for a club of their stature, and they were exposed not only by the likes of Liverpool and Manchester United, but also by Southampton and Norwich City.

It may be that is primarily an issue of personnel. The decision not to sign a replacement for Vincent Kompany looks baffling, particularly given the questions over the form of John Stones and Nicolas Otamendi,

Van Dijk...few defenders combine technique and strength like the Liverpool man

and those shortcomings were exposed with the injury to Aymeric Laporte, which in turn meant Fernandinho having to play as a defender, placing increased pressure on Rodri in midfield. City have signed Nathan Ake from Bournemouth for £40 million to try to remedy that, and may even look to sign another centre-back before the deadline.

There are issues at centre-forward as well. Sergio Aguero is 32, while Gabriel Jesus remains frozen in his development. At the moment he is just a notch below the very highest level. He's only 23 and it may be that he suddenly explodes with a 40-goal season, but equally it may not. They may also wonder when Mendy is ever going to deliver on the potential he showed at Monaco, and whether Rodri really is a long-term successor to Fernandinho, who is now 35.

But the biggest question is over structure and organisation. There is an element of self-perpetuation here, that once a weakness is seen, teams try to exploit it and so it becomes more and more apparent. And perhaps to an extent it is reasonable to point out that no team can do everything perfectly, and that if you prioritise passing and touch in your defenders it almost inevitably means that certain defensive qualities will be compromised. The likes of Virgil van Dijk – or Kompany – who are both good on the ball and commanding defenders, are very rare.

But the success of Liverpool raises a vital question. They are at least as aggressive in their press, and yet they very rarely get caught out by simple balls in behind them. What is it that they are doing differently? Is the success of their *Gegenpressing* simply a result of their ferocity through midfield, something Guardiola again perhaps has to sacrifice to an extent to encourage his side's mastery of the ball? Or is it that opponents have become familiar with the Guardiola style of pressing that seemed so radical a decade ago, and that Klopp has taken that to new extremes of organisation? If that is the case then for perhaps the first time in his career, there is tactical work for Guardiola to do.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Preparing... Adama Traore

1 LATHERED UP

Wolverhampton Wanderers may have come up with an ingenious way to help their winger Adama Traore escape the attention of opposition defenders. The pacy dribbler, who was recently recalled to the Spanish national team squad, rubs baby oil onto his arms to prevent opponents from pulling him back, with the Wolves physio spotted administering it on the pitch.

2 THREE IN A ROW

RB Salzburg goalkeeper Daniel Antosch made history in the quarter-finals of the UEFA Youth League when he saved three penalties in a row against Lyon. The 20-year-old dived to his right to keep out Florent da Silva's shot before being penalised by the referee for coming off his line too early. The exact same thing happened on the retaken penalty, leading to a third spot-kick, which Antosch also saved, this time to his left.

3 SILENT SUPPORT

"Which club won the second division championship in the 2018-2019 season?" For close followers of German football, this was a straightforward question on quiz show *Gefragt–Gejagt*, the German equivalent of *The Chase*. Contestant Claus Blumel knew the answer, but refused to say it. The problem? The Borussia Monchengladbach fan could not bring himself to utter the name of his team's biggest rivals, FC Cologne.

Effectively turning down €500, he said: "No, I won't say that, not as a Monchengladbacher!" Gladbach responded on Twitter, saying: "This exemplary behaviour must be rewarded. Dear candidate, please contact us."

4 RED TAPE NIGHTMARE

Portuguese side Portimonense were the lucky beneficiaries of an administrative mix-up last month, cancelling their relegation from the top flight. Having finished second from bottom and set for relegation, the club were spared when it was announced that Vitoria Setubal, a point ahead in 16th, were to be demoted instead after failing to present the necessary requirements for professional registration ahead of the 2020-21 season.

The ruling, which also affects bottom-placed side, Aves, means that both clubs are banned from competing professionally for the new season, sending them down to Portugal's third tier.

5 ROSS JOINS ROSS

Scottish Premiership side Ross County have stumbled upon an innovative new way of scouting players: signing players called Ross. By signing Ross Doohan on loan from Celtic, the club moved closer to a full team of players with the same name as the team itself, with five Ross' in the squad – three of which are goalkeepers.

Ross Draper... another Ross in action for County

ESM
EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

OCTOBER 2020

Immobile ends Barca-Real grip on Golden Shoe

Lazio striker Ciro Immobile has become the first player from outside Barcelona or Real Madrid to be named Europe's outright top marksman since Diego Forlan in 2008-09.

Luis Suarez shared the Golden Shoe with Cristiano Ronaldo while he was still a Liverpool player in 2013-14, but otherwise Spain's two biggest clubs have dominated the award in the last decade.

Immobile is also the first Italian to win it since Francesco Totti collected the honour in 2006-07, and only the third Serie A striker since the award was taken up by ESM in 1996.

The 30-year-old overtook long-time leader Robert Lewandowski in the last week of the Serie A campaign to finish with 36 goals. Bayern's Lewandowski was runner-up with 34, while four-times winner Ronaldo was third with 31.

The Golden Shoe computation is based on UEFA's national rankings at the start of a season. Thus, marksmen from among the top five European leagues benefit from a multiple of 2, the next batch (places six to 22) a factor of 1.5, and the rest 1.

Golden Shoe... Immobile scores against Brescia to move ahead of Lewandowski

Prolific...Erling Haaland

This explains the joint-fifth positioning of Erling Haaland, who scored 16 goals at a 1.5 factor for Austria's RB Salzburg in the first half of 2019-20, and then 13 at a 2 factor for Borussia Dortmund in the second half. They placed him level with Barcelona's record six-time winner Lionel Messi on 50 points, even though the Norwegian scored more goals.

Keir Radnedge

ESM GOLDEN SHOE 2019-2020: FINAL RANKING

(Ranking multiplication based on UEFA coefficient status)

Pos	Name	Goals	Factor	Pts
1	**CIRO IMMOBILE** *(Lazio)*	36	2	72
2	**ROBERT LEWANDOWSKI** *(Bayern Munich)*	34	2	68
3	**CRISTIANO RONALDO** *(Juventus)*	31	2	62
4	**TIMO WERNER** *(RB Leipzig)*	28	2	56
5=	**ERLING HAALAND** *(RB Salzburg/Dortmund)*	29	1.5/2	50
5=	**LIONEL MESSI** *(Barcelona)*	25	2	50
7	**JEAN-PIERRE NSAME** *(Young Boys)*	32	1.5	48
8=	**ROMELU LUKAKU** *(Internazionale)*	23	2	46
8=	**JAMIE VARDY** *(Leicester City)*	23	2	46
10=	**PIERRE-EMERICK AUBAMEYANG** *(Arsenal)*	22	2	44
10=	**DANNY INGS** *(Southampton)*	22	2	44
12=	**KARIM BENZEMA** *(Real Madrid)*	21	2	42
12=	**FRANCESCO CAPUTO** *(Sassuolo)*	21	2	42
14	**RAHEEM STERLING** *(Manchester City)*	20	2	40
15	**MOHAMED SALAH** *(Liverpool)*	19	2	38
16=	**WISSAM BEN YEDDER** *(Monaco)*	18	2	36
16=	**HARRY KANE** *(Tottenham Hotspur)*	18	2	36
16=	**SADIO MANE** *(Liverpool)*	18	2	36
16=	**KYLIAN MBAPPE** *(Paris Saint-Germain)*	18	2	36
16=	**GERARD MORENO** *(Villarreal)*	18	2	36
16=	**LUIS MURIEL** *(Atalanta)*	18	2	36
16=	**JOAO PEDRO** *(Cagliari)*	18	2	36
16=	**ALEXANDER SORLOTH** *(Trabzonspor)*	24	1.5	36
16=	**DUVAN ZAPATA** *(Atalanta)*	18	2	36
25=	**RAUL JIMENEZ** *(Wolverhampton Wanderers)*	17	2	34
25=	**ANTHONY MARTIAL** *(Manchester United)*	17	2	34
25=	**MARCUS RASHFORD** *(Manchester United)*	17	2	34
25=	**JADON SANCHO** *(Borussia Dortmund)*	17	2	34

Goal machine... Jean-Pierre Nsame

Last year's winner... Lionel Messi

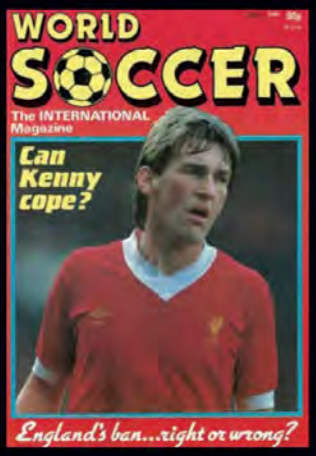
Surprise package... Southampton's Danny Ings

WINNERS IN THE LAST 20 YEARS:

Year	Name	Goals	Factor	Pts
2018–19	**LIONEL MESSI** *(Barcelona)*	36	2	72
2017–18	**LIONEL MESSI** *(Barcelona)*	34	2	68
2016–17	**LIONEL MESSI** *(Barcelona)*	37	2	74
2015–16	**LUIS SUAREZ** *(Barcelona)*	40	2	80
2014–15	**CRISTIANO RONALDO** *(Real Madrid)*	48	2	96
2013–14	**LUIS SUAREZ** *(Liverpool)*	31	2	62
	CRISTIANO RONALDO *(Real Madrid)*	31	2	62
2012–13	**LIONEL MESSI** *(Barcelona)*	46	2	92
2011–12	**LIONEL MESSI** *(Barcelona)*	50	2	100
2010–11	**CRISTIANO RONALDO** *(Real Madrid)*	40	2	80
2009–10	**LIONEL MESSI** *(Barcelona)*	34	2	68
2008–09	**DIEGO FORLAN** *(Atletico Madrid)*	32	2	64
2007–08	**CRISTIANO RONALDO** *(Man. United)*	31	2	62
2006–07	**FRANCESCO TOTTI** *(Roma)*	26	2	52
2005–06	**LUCA TONI** *(Fiorentina)*	31	2	62
2004–05	**THIERRY HENRY** *(Arsenal)*	25	2	50
	DIEGO FORLAN *(Villarreal)*	25	2	50
2003–04	**THIERRY HENRY** *(Arsenal)*	30	2	60
2002–03	**ROY MAKAAY** *(Deportivo La Coruna)*	29	2	58
2001–02	**MARIO JARDEL** *(Sporting)*	42	1.5	63
2000–01	**HENRIK LARSSON** *(Celtic)*	35	1.5	52.5
1999–00	**KEVIN PHILLIPS** *(Sunderland)*	30	2	60

The Golden Shoe is administered, computed and formulated by the European Sports Media group whose members include *World Soccer* (UK) along with *A Bola* (Portugal), *Elf Voetbal* (Netherlands), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Foot Magazine* (Belgium), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *GoalNews/Sentragoal* (Greece), *Guerin Sportivo* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *SoFoot* (France), *Sport Express* (Russia), *Telegraaf/Telesport* (Netherlands) and *Tipsbladet* (Denmark). Affiliated members are *Kick Off* (South Africa), *Titan Sport* (China), *Netease* (China) and *SportalKorea* (South Korea).

WorldSoccer



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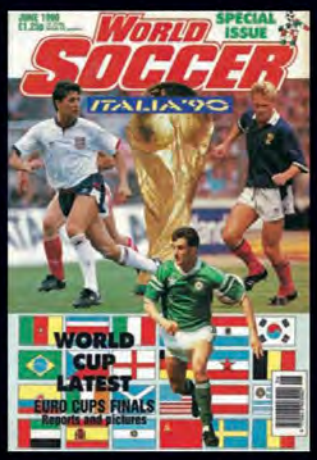

LAST CHANCE

"I learn about David Silva's transfer to Real Sociedad. I have great respect for the player, but not for the man"

Lazio sporting director Igli Tare

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

Returning... Robin van Persie

EUROPE

CARLOS CORBERAN left the coaching staff at Leeds United to replace Danny Cowley at Championship club Huddersfield Town. Birmingham City appointed **AITOR KARANKA** as manager, former assistants **DEAN HOLDEN** and **JASON TINDALL** were promoted to head coach at Bristol City and Bournemouth respectively, while ex-Australia star **HARRY KEWELL** was appointed Oldham manager. Watford installed Serbian coach **VLADIMIR IVIC** as manager.

Monaco appointed ex-Bayern coach **NIKO KOVAC** after firing Robert Moreno.

EUSEBIO DI FRANCESCO took over at Roma following Walter Zenga's exit.

Villarreal announced ex-Arsenal and Sevilla boss **UNAI EMERY** would take over from Javi Calleja. **PABLO MACHIN** was appointed Alaves coach, days after pulling out of a deal to join Chinese side Qingdao Huanghai, and Valencia hired ex-Watford manager **JAVI GRACIA**.

Change of heart... David Silva

ROBIN VAN PERSIE returned to Feyenoord to begin his coaching career.

DAVID SILVA signed for Real Sociedad having seemingly agreed

SUMMER 2020 BIGGEST DEALS SO FAR

Manchester City...Ake

Internazionale... Hakimi

Lille...David

£73.2m	Victor Osimhen	Lille to Napoli
£66m	Arthur	Barcelona to Juventus
£59.2m	*Alvaro Morata	Chelsea to Atletico Madrid
£54.8m	Miralem Pjanic	Juventus to Barcelona
£54m	Timo Werner	RB Leipzig to Chelsea
£45m	*Mauro Icardi	Internazionale to PSG
£40.9m	Leroy Sane	Man. City to Bayern Munich
£40m	Nathan Ake	Bournemouth to Man. City
£36m	Achraf Hakimi	Real Madrid to Internazionale
£33.6m	Hakim Ziyech	Ajax to Chelsea
£28.3m	Francisco Trincao	Braga to Barcelona
£27m	Jonathan David	Gent to Lille
£27m	Rodrigo	Valencia to Leeds United
£22.8m	*Emre Can	Juventus to B. Dortmund
£22.8m	Jude Bellingham	Birmingham City to B. Dortmund
£22.5m	*Nicolo Barella	Cagliari to Internazionale
£21.7m	*Suso	Milan to Sevilla
£21m	Ferran Torres	Valencia to Manchester City
£19.1m	*Tomas Soucek	Slavia Prague to West Ham
£18.5m	Aaron Ramsdale	Bournemouth to Sheffield United
£18m	Everton	Gremio to Benfica
£16.2m	Pedrinho	Corinthians to Benfica
£16m	*Helder Costa	Wolves to Leeds United
£15m	Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg	Southampton to Tottenham
£15m	*Anthony Knockaert	Brighton to Fulham
£14.18m	Antony	Sao Paulo to Ajax
£14.1m	*Karl Toko Ekambi	Villarreal to Lyon
£14m	*Pablo Mari	Flamengo to Arsenal
£13.5m	Luca Waldschmidt	Freiburg to Benfica
£13.5m	*Mario Pasalic	Chelsea to Atalanta
£12m	*Kyle Walker-Peters	Tottenham to Southampton
£11.7m	Kostas Tsimikas	Olympiakos to Liverpool
£11.7m	Axel Disasi	Reims to Monaco
£10.9m	Mohammed Salisu	Real Valladolid to Southampton
£10.9m	Dejan Lovren	Liverpool to Zenit
£10.7m	Martin Terrier	Lyon to Rennes
£9.9m	*Carles Perez	Barcelona to Roma
£9m	Seko Fofana	Udinese to Lens
£8.25m	*Matheus Pereira	Sporting to West Brom
£9m	Adrian Grbic	Clermont to Lorient
£8.1m	Hwang Hee-chan	RB Salzburg to RB Leipzig
£7.2m	Francis Coquelin	Valencia to Villarreal
£7.2m	Alexander Schwolow	Freiburg to Hertha Berlin
£7.2m	Sven Botman	Ajax to Lille

(Loan deal made permanent)*

"I love playing with this lot. We've got some special young players. I'm really happy to share the pitch with them. I joined when I was 17 and some of the lads are the same age…I can guide them"

Borussia Dortmund's Jadon Sancho distances himself from a summer move

Reunion... Matuidi and Beckham played with each other at PSG

Inter Miami make Matuidi first major signing

David Beckham's MLS outfit Inter Miami made their first major move in the transfer market, recruiting France midfielder **BLAISE MATUIDI** from Juventus on a free transfer.

The club had been linked with a host of big names as their first marquee signing, including Uruguay duo Luis Suarez and Edinson Cavani, but opted for the industrious World Cup winner, who has won multiple league titles with both Paris Saint-Germain and Juve, as well as 82 international caps.

to join Lazio. Other notable free transfers included **JOE HART** joining Tottenham Hotspur, **JAN VERTONGHEN** to Benfica, **WILLIAN** to Arsenal, **BURAK YILMAZ** to Lille, and Champions League winner **JON OBI MIKEL** moving to Stoke City in the English Championship.

Talented Asian duo, Malaysia striker **LUQMAN HAKIM** and Iran goalkeeper **ALIREZA BEIRANVAND**, joined Belgian outfits Kortrijk and Antwerp respectively.

CONCACAF

Former APOEL and Leeds United manager **THOMAS CHRISTIANSEN** was appointed head coach of Panama's national team.

ASIA

In South Korea, ex-Premier League players **KI SUNG-YEUNG** and **MODOU BARROW** joined Seoul FC and Jeonbuk Motors respectively.

JORDI CRUYFF was appointed coach of Chinese Super League outfit Shenzhen FC, just a month after leaving his post as Ecuador national team boss without managing a game.

China-bound...Jordi Cruyff

Appointments, sackings and loans

OUT

Baines...bows out

World Cup winner... Benedikt Howedes

EUROPE

Former Schalke and Lokomotiv Moscow defender **BENEDIKT HOWEDES** announced that he is retiring aged 32 for family reasons. Everton left-back **LEIGHTON BAINES**, 35, also ended his career after 420 games for the Toffees.

Veteran Chile goalkeeper **CLAUDIO BRAVO** left Manchester City after his contract expired.

AFRICA

ARISTIDE BANCE, cult-hero of Burkina Faso, retired after a remarkable career involving 22 different clubs across Europe, Asia and Africa.

ASIA

LEE LIM-SAENG stepped down as Suwon Samsung Bluewings head coach after a disappointing start to the season, with boss **CHOI YONG-SOO** also departing from FC Seoul.

Ex-China goalkeeper **YANG ZHI** announced his retirement aged 37.

CONCACAF

Atlanta United and **FRANK DE BOER** parted ways after the club's poor showing at the MLS Is Back Tournament.

Sacked... De Boer

Milan

Italian giants tear up plans for a new sporting director

A little over a year ago, Serie A giants Milan, unhappy with their seasonal results, sacked coach Gennaro Gattuso. To many, it seemed harsh. After all, Gattuso had done reasonably well, claiming fifth place in Serie A, just one point away from Champions League qualification. 12 months later, Milan have just finished sixth, 12 points adrift of the Champions League. However, this time the club have kept faith with current coach Stefano Pioli.

It is of course true that it is not always a good idea to sack the coach. The thing is for months now, Italian and German media have been assuring us that the former RB Leipzig coach, Ralf Rangnick, would be Milan's head coach and sporting director in time for the 2020-21 season. That plan has now been abandoned.

Last October, after a poor start which saw the club lose four of their first six league games, then Milan coach, Marco Giampaolo, the man who succeeded Gattuso, was given the old heave-ho. Suddenly, the sacking of Gattuso did not look so smart, as experienced stop-gap coach Pioli, formerly of Lazio, Internazionale and Fiorentina, was rushed in.

Not long after that, Milan CEO Ivan Gazidis was assuring fans that the club was laying serious plans for the future with a view to finding a permanent, non-caretaker coach. The successful Rangnick was reported to have concluded a deal to take up his new role at the club.

And then, the results began to talk. Having sunk as low as 12th, Pioli's Milan began to climb back towards the top of the table. In particular, Milan blossomed in the post-lockdown restart period in June and July, picking up nine wins and three draws in 12 Serie A games. No side did better in that period.

Milan picked up wins against Roma (2-0), Lazio (3-0) and champions Juventus (4-2), while it it took two equally in-form sides, Napoli (2-2) and Atalanta (1-1), to call a temporary halt to their winning gallop. The only other stain on their record, a 2-2 draw with SPAL, involved a comeback of true character, scoring twice in the last 15 minutes.

Not only did Milan hit a white-hot streak of good results, but they also produced some very attractive football. Suddenly, all those ugly ducklings – Rafael Leao and Ante Rebic in attack, Ismael Bennacer, Hakan Calhanoglu and Franck Kessie in midfield, and Theo Hernandez in defence began to look like world beaters.

What had happened? In one word – Ibrahimovic.

Obviously, Milan's good form depended on a combination of factors, but nothing was more game changing for them than the leadership, wisdom and class of the 38-year-old. Remember, this is a young Milan – Leao and goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma are 21, Bennacer and Hernandez 22, Kessie and Lucas Paqueta 23.

> Media have been assuring us that Ralf Rangnick would be Milan's head coach and sporting director... that plan has now been abandoned

New era... Ibrahimovic is central to Milan's plans

When "Ibra" was pulled out of MLS, attracted back to Milan from LA Galaxy last December, many wondered if this was not a pathetic last hurrah for both player and club. Could Zlatan still be effective, indeed influential, in Serie A?

The answer, with ten goals and five assists in 18 league games, was a resounding yes. He reached the milestone of 50 goals in his second spell at the club, becoming the first player in history to reach half a century for both of the Milan teams.

Perhaps the Swede was helped by the tempo of Serie A, less intense than the Premier League, where he was last seen in Europe. But what is beyond doubt is that he is a huge influence on this team.

It was at this point, then, that Milan's best laid plans fell apart. If it ain't broke, don't fix it, and by the season's end Milan were looking anything but broke. Just as the team was beginning to seriously come together, it made no sense to dismantle it and start all over again with the wholescale rebuilding job that Rangnick, in various interviews, had indicated as necessary.

By the middle of July, the Rangnick idea was dropped while Pioli was confirmed, given a two-year contract

Milan coach... Stefano Pioli

Celebrating... Zlatan with vice-captain Gianluigi Donnarumma

Iker Casillas

Real's greatest keeper set for shock return

extension. Furthermore, it looks likely that Ibrahimovic, Donnarumma and others such as Leao, Bennacer, Kessie, Rebic, Calhanoglu and Hernandez will all be staying. Milan's future will be built upon a group of talented young players, led by one old one.

Some big questions still remain unanswered, though. Milan is currently owned by US investment firm, Elliott Management Corporation, one of the biggest of its kind and a company whose business concerns hedge funds, share prices and profit margins, not football. Sooner or later, Elliott will want to sell Milan.

If for some ill-fated reason, the Milan of Pioli, Ibrahimovic and Donnarumma does not work out next season, do not be surprised if we all go back to the drawing board again. The "Rangnick Revolution" was not enacted this spring, the coach was not sacked this time – but 12 months from now, if seven-time winners Milan are still not in the Champions League, do not be surprised if you hear people talking about a new Milan coach. That may however, be too late for Rangnick, whose work in Germany has made him highly sought after.

Paddy Agnew

Real Madrid legend Iker Casillas is expected to make a special return to the Bernabeu as an adviser, five years after an acrimonious exit from the club. The 39-year-old announced his retirement from football last month, having spent the final five years of his illustrious playing career at Porto. Unfortunately for Porto and Casillas, he didn't make a single appearance in his final year at the club after suffering a shock heart attack in training early last year.

Addressing his 9.1 million followers on Twitter, the three-time Champions League winner said: "The important thing is the path you travel and the people who accompany you, not the destination to which it takes you. I think I can say, without hesitation, that it has been the path and the dream destination."

While he'll be remembered by most for his exploits for Real Madrid and Spain, Casillas also had great success in Portugal. He made 156 appearances for Porto after joining in 2015, winning the title in 2017-18 and Portuguese Super Cup in 2018. He was given a role on the club's coaching staff during his recovery, but never made a return to the pitch during last season's double-winning campaign. His popularity was summed up by a social media campaign set up by supporters in a bid to get him one final appearance before his retirement. Sadly, Casillas couldn't feature due to medical reasons, but it's not the first time that he's been denied a fairy-tale ending.

Real Madrid released a statement on their website shortly after the goalkeeper's retirement referring to him as "one of the greatest legends of our club and world football", but his exit from *Los Blancos* certainly didn't live up to that title. Casillas made 725 appearances for Real during a 16-year spell at the club, winning three Champions League titles and five La Liga crowns. However, after a couple of difficult seasons under Jose Mourinho and Carlo Ancelotti, Casillas was left to say his goodbyes alone in a press conference – far from the rousing send-off worthy of a player who has played more Champions League games than any other.

Real Madrid president Florentino Perez was widely criticised by the club's supporters at the time, but looks set to try to redeem himself by bringing the former icon back to the club five years on. According to reports, Casillas will return to the Bernabeu as an adviser, working directly under Perez.

It seems like the logical next step for a player who is undoubtedly the best goalkeeper in the 118-year history of Madrid. However, at one stage, it seemed as though Casillas might be set for a different career. He had considered the possibility of moving into football politics and running for president of the Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF). If it wasn't for the coronavirus pandemic, this may well have been an avenue he pursued.

Lionel Messi and Sergio Ramos led the tributes to the goalkeeper following his retirement. The former scored 17 of his 26 Clasico goals past Casillas, while the latter is the only player to have made more appearances for Spain. The pair were close team-mates for club and country, forming the heart of the defence that won the 2010 World Cup and two European Championships.

Sam Straw

HONOURS & ACHIEVEMENTS

- FIFA World Cup (2010)
- 2x UEFA European Championship (2008, 2012)
- 5x La Liga (2000-01, 2002-03, 2006-07, 2007-08, 2011-12)
- 3x UEFA Champions League (1999-2000, 2001-02, 2013-14)
- FIFA Club World Cup (2014)
- Primeira Liga (2017-18)
- Portuguese Super Cup (2018)
- 2x UEFA Super Cup (2002, 2014)
- 2x Copa del Rey (2010-11, 2013-14)
- 2x Intercontinental Cup (1998, 2002)
- 4x Spanish Super Cup (2001, 2003, 2008, 2012)
- Most appearances in the UEFA Champions League (177)

Historic moment... Casillas celebrates winning the 2010 World Cup against the Netherlands with Carles Puyol

Xavi

Legendary midfielder's future as Barca coach is a matter of when, not if

Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu was clear: "Xavi will be Barca's coach, sooner or later." Just not quite yet, it seems.

On July 5, the former *Blaugrana* playmaker penned a new deal to see him remain as coach of Qatari club Al Sadd until the summer of 2021. A month later, his former club appointed Ronald Koeman to replace Quique Setien.

"Happy to be a part of this great club for another year," Xavi commented on Instagram after his new contract was announced. "We will keep up our hard work and total dedication to the club to repay their confidence in us."

The caveat? As Barcelona-based newspaper *Sport* reported, the contract includes a clause that allows him to leave if his former employers come calling.

It's no secret that Xavi, like Koeman, sees Barcelona as his dream job. The former midfielder, however, has already turned it down.

"Yes, I received an offer from Barcelona when Abidal and Oscar Grau were here, but I didn't accept it because it's too soon. But let nobody doubt that it's my dream in the future to coach Barca."

The reasons for Xavi's rejection have been debated, with speculation surrounding a frosty relationship with Bartomeu – a notion that the coach himself seemed to allude to in further comments to *Sport* in June.

"I want to take footballing decisions at Barcelona. It's clear that, after the elections, the stage would be set. I'm not ruling anything out."

Barcelona's presidential elections are planned for March 2021, a couple of months before Xavi's Al Sadd contract expires, with businessman Victor Font the favourite to replace Bartomeu.

Font and Xavi are fond acquaintances, and the presidential hopeful has already spoken of his desire to instate the club legend as coach.

A proud Catalan, all-time great and captain for many years, it's clear why he is such a romantic choice for supporters. With Xavi in charge, there would be no suggestion of Barca's identity being forgotten or ignored – an accusation that was made against Setien, Ernesto Valverde and Luis Enrique.

Champion... Al Sadd players celebrate winning the Qatar Cup in January

"It's too soon [to coach Barcelona]. But let nobody doubt that it's my dream in the future to coach Barca"

The appointment of Koeman, himself a former Barca hero, is unlikely to be a significant obstacle for Xavi. Barring an extraordinary turnaround from the Dutchman, the next president will make appointing their own head coach a priority.

Whether Xavi actually is the right man for the job is another question. It was only in May 2019 that he retired from playing, having made 117 appearances for Al Sadd in four years, and helping them to their first Qatar Stars League title in six years.

Ending his playing career on a high, he took advantage of manager Jesualdo Ferreira's decision to step down, and replaced him a month after clinching the title as a player.

It wasn't long before he lifted the first trophy of his coaching career. His side triumphed over Al Duhail in the Qatar Super Cup in August 2019, in doing so becoming the first person to win the competition as a player and a coach.

He tasted further success in the final of the Qatar Cup in January, contested between the previous season's top four, while his team lead their group in the 2020 AFC Champions League –

Record-breaker... Xavi played a record 767 games for Barca

set to resume in September.

Domestically, Al Sadd progressed to the semi-finals of the on-hold Emir and Ooredoo Cups this year and finished third in the league. Victory in the Emir Cup will guarantee them a place in the 2021 Champions League.

His reign hasn't been without its bumps, though. A run of three defeats in October sparked concerns, especially after he decided to rotate his squad against Al Wakrah in the Ooredoo Cup, resulting in a 5-1 loss.

Unsurprisingly, he favours a 4-3-3 formation, which occasionally becomes a 4-2-3-1 or 4-1-4-1 while defending. His centre-backs adopt wide positions, encouraging his full-backs further up the field – much like Barcelona did while he was at the club.

Al Sadd attack and defend as a team, with a high press applied if they're close to the opponent's goal. They prefer attacking, though – in their first 18 games of 2019-20 they were by far the top scorers in the league with 47, yet also had the fifth-worst defence, conceding 28.

Experienced midfielders Gabi and Marco Fabian have recently left the club, but their replacement is more than equipped to shoulder the creative burden.

Santi Cazorla played his last game for Villarreal in July after 334 games and 57 goals across three spells at the club where he began his career. His final years at Arsenal were plagued by injuries – after eight operations on his ankle he contracted gangrene and was even in danger of losing his leg – yet his recovery has been remarkable. He played 35 league matches in each of his last two seasons, and in his final campaign was directly involved in 20 goals – more than any midfielder in La Liga.

Legend...Cazorla left Villarreal as the club's top-scoring midfielder

At the age of 35, he was one of the best midfielders in Spain, and returned to the national squad in 2019. Selection for Euro 2020 is not out of the question.

With so much still to give the European game, the timing of his decision to step down is questionable.

Speaking to Villarreal's website, Cazorla said: "I've had a great time, but it's time to end this stage of my career. It's a decision I've thought about a lot. Every game I find it harder to give 100 per cent and I had to be honest with myself and the club."

The midfielder has suffered more than most during his career, and he's got the scars to prove it: his final ankle operation required skin grafted from a tattoo on his arm. He has earned the right to ease his way into retirement with a final generous payday in a less demanding league.

Still, his career is far from over. Cazorla and Xavi were team-mates in Spain's successful 2008 and 2012 European Championship squads, and the prospect of them teaming up again is an intriguing one. The new arrival will likely pull the strings for Al Sadd's attack, while managing such a talent will be a valuable experience for Xavi. This time next year, he could find himself in charge of several others in the Nou Camp dugout.

Jared Tinslay

Istanbul Basaksehir

Turkish minnows' rise to the top is no fairy tale

For only the second time since 1985, Turkey has a league champion from outside the "Big Three" of Besiktas, Fenerbahce and Galatasaray. Unlike Bursaspor's surprise success in 2009-10, this is more than a one-off. Istanbul Basaksehir are genuine game-changers in Turkey.

Istanbul is a divided city. The so-called "Intercontinental Derby" pits Fenerbahce from the Asian side against Galatasaray in the European side. It is a ludicrously passionate affair, while Besiktas' clashes against the two sides are equally fiery. Football in the city has often quite literally been a matter of life and death, with fans obsessively devoted to their own club to extreme levels.

The idea of another Istanbul team elbowing their way into top spot ahead of all three seemed inconceivable. In such a tribal city, with the battle lines already so clearly drawn, how could a club like Istanbul Basaksehir – founded as an amateur side in 1990 – attract any fans?

The truth is that they haven't. Figures vary, but their average attendance during their title-winning season was somewhere between 500 and 2,000, the lowest in the league. When they were drawn against Burnley in the Europa League two years ago, they drew a home crowd of just 4,503, and didn't sell any tickets for the second leg at Turf Moor. In July the team paraded their league trophy through the city on an open-top bus to virtually empty streets. Lockdown restrictions are in place of course, but it's unlikely that these would have stopped fans of the Big Three from celebrating.

Yet, although they have very little support, this is not a team that has been built on a shoestring budget. They have several big names in the autumn of their careers (far from a new phenomenon in Turkish football), with former Premier League stars Martin Skrtel, Gael Clichy, Gokhan Inler, Robinho and Demba Ba all appearing for them last season, while the likes of Emre Belozoglu and Emmanuel Adebayor have signed in the past.

Erdogan FC... Basaksehir are the favoured club of the Turkish president

In addition, they have a relatively new ground, the Basaksehir Fatih Terim Stadium. Built in 2014 and named after the current Galatasaray coach, it has a capacity of just over 17,000, but is yet to sell out.

A clue to their success can be found in the exhibition match that took place when the ground was opened. Amongst the stars on show that day was Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. After scoring a hat-trick, the No.12 shirt that he was wearing was officially retired by the club, and his portrait was hung up at the training ground.

Shortly before the new ground was opened, they announced new sponsors Medipol, a network of health clinics, founded by Erdogan's health minister Fahrettin Koca. The club president at the time, Goksel Gumusdag, is married to one of Erdogan's wife's nieces. The district of Basaksehir itself was built by Erdogan during his time as mayor of Istanbul, and is populated by many of his supporters. Even the club colours of orange and blue are those of the country's ruling party, the AKP.

Top scorer...former Newcastle United striker Demba Ba

Erdogan's patronage explains the club's sponsorship from Turkish Airlines and DenizBank, one of the country's largest private banks. With such backing, more investment is sure to follow. Arsenal outcast and known Erdogan supporter Mesut Ozil is among those linked with the club, although whether this will be enough to attract more fans remains to be seen.

> Erdogan's patronage explains the club's sponsorship from Turkish Airlines and DenizBank

Sooner or later, Basaksehir will need to attract bigger crowds if they are to continue growing and avoid scrutiny from UEFA. In June, Trabzonspor became the latest Turkish side to fall foul of FFP regulations, and were handed a one-year ban from European competition. If it hasn't already, the regulators' gaze will soon be turning to the Turkish champions in an empty stadium from an Istanbul suburb.

Then again, with such friends in high places, the club may not need to worry.

Jamie Evans

Cyriel Dessers

Eredivisie top scorer targeting international recognition at new club

Cyriel Dessers wasted no time in beginning to pay back the investment made in him by Racing Genk with a goal on his debut at the start of the new Belgian season, following his €4 million move from Heracles Almelo in the neighbouring Netherlands.

With 15 goals from 26 matches, he had topped the Eredivisie's goal charts alongside Feyenoord's Steven Berghuis, firing Heracles to eighth place.

It proved a breakout campaign for the 25-year-old, something of a late bloomer but now with his sights firmly set on an international career.

Belgian-born Dessers received one call-up at Under-21 level for his country of birth but was an unused substitute. Now he is being earmarked for a debut with Nigeria, where his mother hails from.

"Before the 2018 World Cup I had some contact with them and they told me I had to go to a club where I would play weekly," he explained.

At that stage, Dessers' potential had been recognised by FC Utrecht. The Eredivisie club signed him after 22 goals in the Dutch second division for NAC Breda, but he made more appearances as a substitute than a starter in his first season, and his second campaign was ruined by a bad knee injury.

The move to Heracles in 2019, who paid €1m for him and have realised a four-fold profit on their investment, was both a setback and an opportunity.

"Everyone has to deal with setbacks at one time or another. Injuries, form, confidence, coaches who are not sure about you. When Dick Advocaat took over at Utrecht I thought I had his confidence but after one week I was on the bench. But in Almelo the coach left me in the team even when things weren't going well. He knew I could be important with goals and assists."

And so it proved, as Dessers went on to dominate the scoring charts in the Dutch league. There were key goals too, like the winner over Ajax in a rare triumph for the provincial club over the Amsterdam giants. By mid-season he had created enough interest that there were talks with Celta Vigo and struggling SPAL in Serie A about a January move, but neither were concluded.

"I do have the ambition to still play in one of the top five leagues in Europe but it was not to be this time around because of the coronavirus. I think the crisis made it difficult for the agents in the transfer market," he added. But Genk was a more than satisfactory alternative. It was the club he supported as a boy, having had trials there as a seven-year-old and he often played against them in preseason scrimmages with his first professional club OH Leuven.

> "I do have the ambition to still play in one of the top five leagues in Europe but it was not to be this time around"
>
> Cyriel Dessers

"I had long dreamed to play in their stadium. Hard work has paid off and I'm now where I want to be."

Next then is to win a first cap for Nigeria. Dessers popped over to London to speak to Super Eagles coach Gernot Rohr in the early part of the year and not long after received a call-up for two Africa Nations Cup qualifiers in March against Sierra Leone. The matches were put on ice by the pandemic but will likely be played in November.

"That was painful because I thought it could have been one of the best moments of my life, certainly my career."

That debut is not far away, even with stiff competition for places in Nigeria's attack – not least from Napoli's new €60m man Victor Osimhen. Still, if Dessers can reproduce at Genk what he did at Heracles last season, he will be more than worth his place.

Mark Gleeson

New signing...Dessers signed for Genk at the end of June

eyewitness

Tom Kundert reports

PORTUGAL

Dragons rise again

Porto's new emphasis on youth

Porto are back on top. After dominating Portuguese football for decades, their hegemony seemed to have been wrested away by Benfica, who reeled off four straight championship triumphs from 2013 to 2017. But the appointment of fiery former winger Sergio Conceicao as head coach has proven a wise decision. Porto were at the summit of the league when it was interrupted, and they stayed there when football resumed, clinching a second title win in three years.

This one, however, feels like the beginning of something different.

Porto's domestic supremacy in Portugal (the Dragons won the league 16 times between 1992 and 2013), which extended to success in Europe, winning one Champions League and two Europa Leagues in that time, was fundamentally built on brilliant scouting.

Porto made a habit of enticing talented players squandered by their biggest rivals, who would then excel at the Estadio do Dragao, such as Maniche, Deco and Joao Moutinho. But the biggest difference-maker, especially in international competition, was the club's ability to identify emerging talent from South America, develop it and reap the rewards both on the pitch and subsequently in the transfer market. Radamel Falcao, Hulk and James Rodriguez are just three from a lengthy list of players who gave magnificent service to the Blue and Whites on the pitch, and who subsequently boosted the club's coffers by generating huge fees when sold on.

The formula was so well implemented that former football director Antero Henrique kept a meticulously elaborated "shadow team" document of two targets for every position on the pitch from all around the world, ready to be purchased in anticipation of the latest star being transferred for a huge profit.

Unfortunately for Porto, others caught on. The ever-increasing wealth of Europe's major leagues enabled richer clubs to set up complex global scouting networks and make irresistible offers for the football stars of tomorrow. When UEFA outlawed third-party ownership, a system routinely used by Porto, the Portuguese side definitively could not compete for the best young South Americans and the scout-buy-develop-sell model that had served them so well was largely defunct.

How did Porto respond? In the same way that all of Portugal's major clubs did. By investing heavily in their youth training structure. If you cannot buy top talents, you must create them yourself.

The efforts made in this area have borne fruits. Ruben Neves, Andre Silva and Diogo Dalot were sold for a combined total of almost €80 million. The club's financial difficulties – which included falling foul of UEFA's Financial Fair Play policy, leading to a ban on buying players – necessitated the sale of the aforementioned trio before they were able to leave a lasting mark on Porto's senior team.

Today, the hope among Porto fans is that homegrown stars will play a big role in the first team. The evidence from the latest league conquest has raised those hopes further. Porto became the first Portuguese team to win the UEFA Youth League in 2018-19, and eight of the players from that side helped them lift the title this year.

Back on top...Porto won their 29th league title in July

Vitor Ferreira

Romario Baro

Since the turn of the millennium, Porto can lay undisputed claim to the crown of the most successful club in European competition outside the continent's four richest leagues, adorning their trophy cabinet with an array of international silverware that is the envy of all but the so-called super-clubs, and which even betters some of those. The dream now is that the new iterations of Porto can emulate the success of the exceptional teams of the recent past, only this time not with footballers bought from far-off lands, but with local talent nurtured in-house.

PORTO'S PEARLS

It may have been the most untypical of seasons owing to the coronavirus pandemic, but 2019-20 will forever be etched in the memory of eight young players who were given their professional bow in top-level football and ended the season with a championship medal around their necks.

Curiously, the highest hopes for making it big are reserved for two players who have featured less than many were expecting this season. Centre-back Diogo Leite is a regular Portugal Under-21 international. Porto stalwart Pepe knows a thing or two about making a success of that position, and he has no doubts about the quality of his young defensive partner.

"In my opinion, Leite is the best central defender in Portugal," says the former Real Madrid man. "I see a very rosy future for him. Provided he remains focused and humble and continues to assimilate everything transmitted to him by the older players and the coach, he will become a reference point at our club and even for Portugal. He's a centre-back with rare qualities: a superb left foot, fast, strong, very good at bringing the ball out, and he reads the game well."

Exciting attacking right-back Tomas Esteves is another name that has created a buzz in the world of youth football. On the back of his burgeoning reputation, for several months it seemed Porto would lose him as negotiations to extend his contract dragged on, but in June he signed on the dotted line, with Porto president Pinto da Costa announcing the deal himself. "Lots of people have been asking us to renew his contract, but that's not the reason we renewed it. We renewed it because the coach told me he has big expectations of Esteves, he has a lot of quality and enormous potential. Given his passion for football and for our club, everything is in place for things to go well."

Romario Baro is a combative and technically-gifted holding midfielder who started the season strongly, until injuries halted his progress. The Guinea-Bissau born player has reportedly attracted interest from Juventus and Real Madrid.

Darting striker Fabio Silva became Porto's youngest debutant in a league match when he came on as a substitute in the opening match of the season against Gil Vicente, three weeks after his 17th birthday. As the campaign progressed, he subsequently became the youngest-ever starter and the youngest-ever scorer for the Dragons.

Fabio Vieira took his bow after the resumption of football and made an immediate impact. The 226 minutes granted to the stylish midfielder over eight matches were enough for him to score two goals and add an assist.

Goalkeeper Diogo Costa, midfielder Vitor Ferreira and winger Joao Mario have all had limited opportunities so far. However, none of the trio looked overawed when given the chance to turn out for the first team, and with all three shining brightly for Portugal's youth teams over a number of years, they will be knocking on the door of the first team next season.

Name	Position	DOB (age)	2019-20 league games
Fabio Silva	*Striker*	*19/7/2002 (18)*	*12*
Romario Baro	*Midfielder*	*25/1/2000 (20)*	*9*
Diogo Leite	*Centre-back*	*23/1/1999 (21)*	*9*
Vitor Ferreira	*Midfielder*	*13/2/2000 (20)*	*8*
Fabio Vieira	*Midfielder*	*30/5/2000 (20)*	*8*
Diogo Costa	*Goalkeeper*	*19/9/1999 (20)*	*3*
Tomas Esteves	*Right-back*	*3/4/2002 (18)*	*2*
Joao Mario	*Winger*	*3/1/2000 (20)*	*2*

Fabio Silva...Porto's youngest-ever player

Diogo Leite

Diogo Costa

CONCEICAO'S SOFTLY-SOFTLY APPROACH

While utilising the fledgling players at his disposal regularly throughout their title-winning season, Porto coach Sergio Conceicao has been happy to drip-feed them into the first team, and has even made a point of pouring cold water on the lofty expectations of the fans and media who are hungry to see the local kids make good.

"Porto are in great shape in terms of young players that can contribute to the senior team. But this question of youth players seems to be in fashion. It's almost as if I have to play them because they came through the academy, and that's not right. That is not how I think. I don't care if a player is 17 years old or 35 years old. What's important is the quality they show and the effort they make in training.

"Only by watching the players in training every day can the coach pick the best team for any given match. I don't want to give players more chances just because they came through the academy. I'll never do that, because we're talking about a professional squad of players and everybody has to work hard to earn their place, then it's up to me to choose.

"But there are youngsters working with us who are ready. I see youth players with a lot of quality. Now it's a question of adding a competitive mentality, and that doesn't come overnight. I think in this respect, these youngsters are a little lacking compared to what happened in the past. On the other hand, they have some positive qualities that give them an edge over young players from my playing days.

"It's a question of finding the right balance to launch the careers of these players not because of what their parents want, what their agents want, or what the fans want, but in accordance with what the team needs."

> "I don't care if a player is 17 years old or 35 years old. What's important is the quality they show and the effort they make in training"
>
> Porto head coach, Sergio Conceicao

Sergio Conceicao... Porto's head coach since 2017

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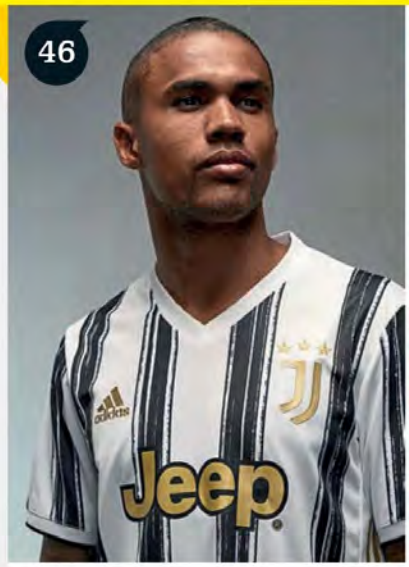
SEASON PREVIEW

2020-21



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Big six back on top

PLAYERS TO WATCH

▲ MASON GREENWOOD
(Manchester United)
One of the biggest young English talents to break through in recent times. Two-footed with a hammer strike, he hit ten Premier league goals in a breakout 2019-20. If he continues with his progess, he'll be a certainty for Euro 2020.

▲ NATHAN FERGUSON
(Crystal Palace)
The young defender's free transfer from West Bromwich Albion went somewhat under the radar, but the 19-year-old is a versatile defender with plenty of talent and potential, plus England youth caps.

▲ BEN WHITE
(Brighton)
Leeds fans were desperate to keep White after starring in their promotion season, starting the social media campaign #FreeBenWhite. Can the 22-year-old centre-back adjust to the Premier League – wherever he ends up plying his trade?

▲ WILLIAM SALIBA
(Arsenal)
Gunners fans have high hopes that the tall France Under-20 centre-back can finally solve their perennial problems in defence. He'll need time to settle, but his potential is limitless. Could really complement David Luiz in central defence.

▲ HAKIM ZIYECH
(Chelsea)
With simply astounding numbers during his spell with Ajax in the Eredivisie, the Moroccan assist king could form one of the best attacking trios in Europe if his partnership clicks alongside Timo Werner and Christian Pulisic.

The team to beat...Liverpool

For large parts of the last Premier League season, it seemed certain that the "Big Six's" vice-like grip on the Champions League places was to end.

Leicester City were flying high and offering the closest challenge to the top two; Wolverhampton Wanderers were building on their impressive debut season; new boys Sheffield United were breathing down everybody's neck. Meanwhile, Arsenal, Tottenham and Manchester United all had problems of their own, and when Manchester City were banned from European football, it seemed that a thorough shake-up was on the way.

In the end of course, it was normal service resumed. CAS overturned Manchester City's ban, and they and Liverpool were joined in the top four by Chelsea and Manchester United, who capitalised on Leicester's post-lockdown implosion. Tottenham completed the top six, while Arsenal, the one side to miss out, leapfrogged Wolves into the Europa League by virtue of winning the FA Cup. The top six's dominance was re-established.

One to watch...it's a big season for City's Phil Foden

> There is an almost rock-paper-scissors quality to the top six: all just as capable of beating one as they are losing to another

How they will stack up in 2020-21 will be intriguing. As it stands, there is an almost rock-paper-scissors quality to them: all just as capable of beating one as they are losing to another.

In the FA Cup final, Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta outthought Chelsea's Frank Lampard, who in turn has outfoxed his old mentor, Tottenham boss Jose Mourinho, twice. Spurs themselves pulled off a counter-attacking masterclass in July's North London derby, while Ole Gunnar Solskjaer also countered his way to a Manchester derby double. As Jonathan Wilson points out in his column (page 16), City often came unstuck against fast, direct counters, though they may take encouragement from their 4-0 thrashing of Liverpool – even if the Reds had already won the league at that point. In the same period, the champions also came unstuck against Guardiola's former understudy, Arteta.

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that Jurgen Klopp's side are an exception to this rule, on the evidence of last season. They lost just once before the title was sealed – a rare off day away at Watford – and won 11 out of 14 games against their top eight rivals. Undoubtedly, they are still the team to beat.

If they have a weakness, it is that they thrive so much on momentum. In the relentless nature of the Premier League where the games come thick and fast, this is usually a positive, particularly in a season where the games will need to be

GRADY DIANGANA
(West Ham)
Manager David Moyes has often signed Championship talent in the past, this time one has been handed to him. Diangana's form on loan at West Brom earned him a spot in the England U21s, and he is ready for the Premier League.

JOSH BROWNHILL
(Burnley)
After arriving from Bristol City in January, the central midfielder quietly became a key cog in Burnley's well-oiled machine, improving with every game. If the Clarets are to improve on last season's tenth place, he will play a big role.

JACK GREALISH
(Aston Villa)
The clever playmaker is established as an Aston Villa legend and has proven that he can compete in the Premier League. His next challenge is whether he can perform in a side not built around him and break into the England team.

CHE ADAMS
(Southampton)
Adams had to wait until July for his first Premier League goal, then added three more before the end of the season, suggesting that he has found his feet in the top flight. His strike partnership with Danny Ings could be lethal.

FERRAN TORRES
(Manchester City)
City have an abundance of stars able to perform on the wing – Sterling, Mahrez, Bernardo and Foden – but Torres is a special talent. One of the best players of his generation, he has outstanding ability on the ball and an eye for goal.

crammed in after a delayed start. Yet they are susceptible to rustiness and a lack of fluidity when they don't have games in their legs, as evidenced by their patchy form both post-lockdown and after the mid-season break in January.

They were also guilty of an overreliance on their full-backs, Trent Alexander-Arnold and Andy Robertson, though this may be remedied by the promotion of academy product Neco Williams and new signing Kostas Tsimikas, an £11.7 million arrival from Olympiakos.

If other managers can learn from Klopp, it is in the way that he identified Liverpool's biggest weakness and improved it, even at the expense of positives. The Reds' defence was the best in the league in 2019-20, yet their famed front three had their lowest-scoring league season since they began playing together – Roberto Firmino didn't even score his first league goal at Anfield until July.

The side that can address their own weaknesses best will be the most likely to close the gap. Manchester City have moved to strengthen their "glass jaw" by adding Bournemouth defender Nathan Ake; United, on the other hand need to be better at breaking down deep-lying defences, hence their interest in Jadon Sancho and Jack Grealish. Chelsea's young side are already due to improve by virtue of another year's experience, though they also need to concede fewer goals and may replace goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga in order to do so. Like Manchester United, Tottenham need more variety in attack to overcome stubborn defences, and also cover for the fragile Harry Kane. Arsenal have the most ground to make up, but have finally shown signs of being able to take points from their top six rivals, and with more consistency can be a force once more. The experience of ex-Chelsea winger Willian will be a helpful mentor for emerging stars like Gabriel Martinelli and Bukayo Saka.

Evergreen... Jamie Vardy

Chris Wilder...second season syndrome?

Leicester City fans will rightly bristle at their exclusion from the Big Six. In terms of league titles, they have been more successful than Tottenham and Arsenal in the last ten years, and equally as much so as Liverpool, while Manchester United and Chelsea only just pipped them to the top four. If Brendan Rodgers can identify the cause of their collapse in form, and continue to get the best out of 33-year-old Golden Boot winner Jamie Vardy, the Foxes will certainly be contenders again.

> If Brendan Rodgers can continue to get the best out of 33-year-old Golden Boot winner Jamie Vardy, Leicester will certainly be contenders again

For Wolves, Sheffield United and Burnley, their ability to close the gap to the top seven will depend on their managers. All three – Nuno Espirito Santo, Chris Wilder and Sean Dyche – have rightly received huge praise, but the question of how much further they can take their teams remain, particularly with so many other clubs believing they belong in the top half of the table too.

Everton, Newcastle and West Ham all have aspirations of catching them, as do Southampton, Crystal Palace and Aston Villa, while the three promoted sides will want more than just safety. Helped by new signing Adam Lallana, Brighton also have the potential to shock in innovative coach Graham Potter's second season.

The reality of course is that three will go down, others will be sucked into the relegation dogfight, and for the others a spot in the top half will be the absolute height of their ambition.

The Premier League elite remain just that, and their battles will continue to fascinate and excite. For the rest, it is a scrap for the crumbs that fall from the top of the table.

Jamie Evans

PROMOTED TEAMS

LEEDS UNITED
After winning the league by ten points, Leeds' players are ready to be tested at the top. Kalvin Phillips is a holding midfielder of Premier League class and exciting winger Jack Harrison will remain on loan from Manchester City, while top goalscorer Patrick Bamford has plenty of critics to disprove.

WEST BROMWICH ALBION
The ultimate yo-yo club were promoted from the Championship for a record fifth time with a hugely experienced squad. Between them, Kieran Gibbs, Jake Livermore, Hal Robson-Kanu, Gareth Barry, Matt Phillips, Chris Brunt and Charlie Austin have amassed over 1,500 Premier League appearances.

FULHAM
The Cottagers significantly overspent in their last Premier League campaign, so are likely to place more faith in the current squad this time. Rookie manager Scott Parker masterminded an impressive victory over play-off favourites Brentford in the final, suggesting he has the nous to guide Fulham to safety.

Bielsa-ball's Premier League bow

It is hard to think of a more eagerly anticipated promotion to the Premier League than Leeds United's.

Their long journey back to the top flight has been well documented, and their return was always bound to attract significant spotlight. What might not have been expected, however, was that that spotlight would be focused so closely on one man – manager, Marcelo Bielsa.

The former Newell's Old Boys boss is Leeds' 15th manager since their relegation from the Premier League in 2004. He has the best win rate in the club's history; better even than the great Don Revie, although whether he can maintain that record in the top flight remains to be seen.

There is a contradiction to Bielsa's arrival in the Premier League: he is simultaneously one of the most respected and influential coaches in world football, while also something of an unknown force in the English game. Before arriving at Elland Road, he was last seen on English soil when his Athletic Bilbao side tore Manchester United apart on the way to the 2012 Europa League final, yet he didn't cross the radar of some pundits until his infamous "spy-gate" run-in with Frank Lampard and Derby County in 2018-19.

Bielsa...Leeds' manager will be the focus of much of the club's coverage this season

> Bielsa is simultaneously one of the most respected and influential coaches in world football, while also something of an unknown force in the English game

Nobody really knows what to expect from Bielsa and Leeds. His last top-flight experience was in France, where he was sacked by Lille in 2017. But if Leeds fall short, it will be not for a lack of effort from their manager.

While top-flight managers often speak of the need to find time to get away from the game, this is an alien concept to the former Argentina boss. Bielsa consumes an extraordinary amount of football in his pursuit of every scrap of detail about his opponents. According to *The Athletic*, when Leeds faced Forest Green Rovers in his first preseason game, he requested footage of the League Two side's previous three games – all friendlies against local non-league sides.

He completes a forensic analysis of all his opponents to uncover any weaknesses, yet combines this with a commitment to his own style of play, built on relentless pressing and overwhelming movement off the ball. He insists that his players have the physical fitness to maintain maximum intensity and the tactical understanding to implement his plans.

With such demands upon his teams, fatigue has often been cited as a factor in his failings, and so it was for Leeds in his first year in Yorkshire. Top of the table on New Year's Day, they only won half of their remaining games before suffering a meltdown against Derby in the play-offs. Cracks appeared in the middle of last season too, but a long mid-season break was certainly to their advantage – when the league resumed they won seven out of nine.

Champions... Leeds sealed the Championship title back in July

Progressing to a league with fewer matches will be a welcome change for the Leeds players, and it is likely to be the same group that Bielsa has worked with for the last two years. It has far proven extremely difficult to integrate new players into his style, which is why he is keen to make only a couple of additions.

Whether or not they have the quality to handle the step-up, there will be no shortage of entertainment at Elland Road. Several of Leeds' fixtures are positively mouth-watering, with some fascinating rivalries to renew.

Their clashes with Yorkshire rivals Sheffield United in 2018-19, who pipped them to promotion, were thrilling affairs, while their last meeting with Aston Villa was mired in drama. Leeds allowed Villa to score following a controversial goal, though that was nothing compared to the spat with Lampard. His presence on the Chelsea bench will add to what is already a significant rivalry, though not as great as the one with Manchester United, who remain Leeds' most hated opponents. It will be fascinating to see how Bielsa measures up against the likes of Jurgen Klopp, Pep Guardiola, and Jose Mourinho, while he has already faced Mikel Arteta's Arsenal in last season's FA Cup.

The spotlight then will remain on the man from Rosario. His first tilt at England's top flight is not to be missed.

Jamie Evans

No end in sight for PSG's dominance

While the rest of Europe's top leagues somehow found a way to complete their 2019-20 league seasons behind closed doors, the French – as is often their way – chose to do things differently.

Governing body the LFP suspended both Ligue 1 and Ligue 2 on March 13, and with all sporting events in the country banned until September, on April 28 they announced that neither competition would resume. Paris Saint-Germain were crowned Ligue 1 Champions having topped the table by 12 points with a game in hand when the virus stopped play. After a bit of a legal kerfuffle, it was finally decided that the two bottom sides Amiens and Toulouse would be relegated and replaced by Lorient and Lens for the new season, which got underway on August 21 when Bordeaux drew 0-0 with Nantes in a Friday-night curtain-raiser.

It's hard to know how the unusual routine experienced by French sides this year will affect their European chances in 2020-21 (PSG, Marseille and Rennes are in the Champions League, and Lille and Nice are in the Europa League). But given PSG and Lyon's top displays in the Champions League in August, it looks like it may actually benefit them.

Winners...PSG completed their fourth domestic treble in six seasons

PLAYERS TO WATCH

▲ FLORIAN THAUVIN
(Marseille)
The 27-year-old midfielder missed most of last season through injury, but is now a far better player than when he was in England at Newcastle United. 38 Ligue 1 goals in his previous two seasons, and should improve again in 2020-21.

▲ MAURO ICARDI
(Paris Saint-Germain)
With the departure of Edinson Cavani, Icardi now needs to step up and become the main goal man in the French capital. Signed until 2024 after scoring 20 goals on loan last season, the Argentine is well placed to make his mark.

▲ EDUARDO CAMAVINGA
(Rennes)
The ridiculously talented and mature midfielder will continue his development in Ligue 1 despite serious interest from Real Madrid. Played 25 games last campaign, even though he doesn't turn 18 until November.

Top dogs PSG are in something of a transitional phase right now, with two of the club's talismen, striker Edinson Cavani and defender Thiago Silva, having left as free agents this summer. But head coach Thomas Tuchel still has a hugely impressive squad of players at his disposal, with Neymar, Kylian Mbappe, Marquinhos and Mauro Icardi just four players any club in Europe would like to have on their books. Such a plethora of talent has given the club a headache, in that they've been unable to hold on to many of their talented youngsters, frustrated by what they see as an impassable route to the first team. In the summer, PSG lost two highly-rated 18-year-olds – midfielder Adil Aouchiche to Ligue 1 rivals

Villas-Boas...can the Marseille coach improve on last season's second place?

Saint-Etienne and defender Tanguy Kouassi to Bayern Munich.

Despite these setbacks, it's hard to see anything other than another season of Parisian domination. Given that they completed another domestic treble by winning both the Coupe de France and League Cup behind closed doors in July, it's going to be mighty hard for anybody to push PSG off their perch.

Marseille have put their faith in Pablo Longoria to help them do just that. The 33-year-old Spaniard was installed as OM's sporting director in July, having previously worked at clubs like Valencia, Juventus, Atalanta and Newcastle United. He is a fan of Andre Villas-Boas, and even tried to recruit the Portuguese coach while he was head of recruitment for Recreativo de Huelva in Spain. Longoria replaces the departing Andoni Zubizarreta to "supervise the entire sporting functions of the club, from the first team through to the academy and including recruitment."

Despite these setbacks, it's hard to see anything other than another season of Parisian domination

So far, he has recruited two 21-year-olds – midfielder Pape Gueye from Le Havre and Argentinian defender Leonardo Balerdi on loan from Borussia Dortmund – while Villarreal defender Alvaro Gonzalez has joined permanently after last season's loan. With Marseille playing Champions League football for the first time in seven years, they will need the stars of last season to hit the ground running.

Wonderkid... Saint-Etienne new boy Adil Aouchiche

Rennes, France's third representatives in the Champions League this season, have been quietly going about their business under young coach Julien Stephan. After leading the club to victory against PSG in the final of the 2019 Coupe de France – their first major trophy in 48 years – Stephan took Rennes to a highly creditable third-place finish last season with a squad consisting almost entirely of French players, including highly rated 17-year-old midfielder Eduardo Camavinga. They've added much-travelled France international midfielder Steven Nzonzi to the ranks on loan from Roma, and it will be interesting to see if they can continue their impressive progress this season.

It's also going to be a big season for two of France's most prestigious clubs as they attempt to claw their way back to the top table. Monaco narrowly avoided relegation in 2018-19, but bounced back to finish a creditable ninth last time out. That still wasn't enough to keep Roberto Moreno in the job however, with the Spaniard replaced by Niko Kovac.

With his predecessor lasting less than seven months, Kovac will be under no less pressure than he was in his previous role at Bayern Munich – particularly as he takes charge of a team featuring Ligue 1's joint-top scorer last term, Wissam Ben Yedder, who notched 18 goals to match PSG's Kylian Mbappe.

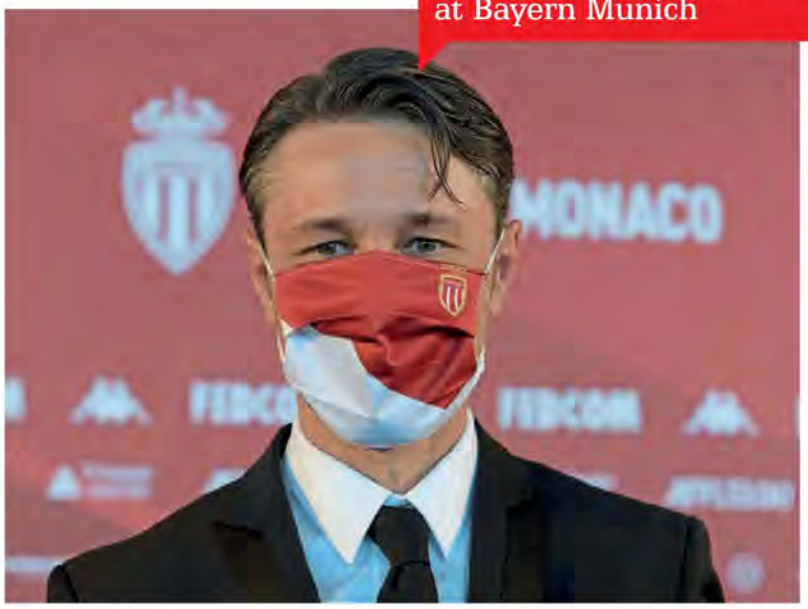
Saint-Etienne, meanwhile, will be hoping that coach Claude Puel can finally bring the good times back to the Stade Geoffroy-Guichard. Puel has already coached Monaco, Lille, Lyon and Nice in France, so is a vastly experienced helmsman. Despite finishing a ghastly 17th last season, *Les Verts* did at least make it to the cup final where they were unlucky to lose to PSG, despite having veteran defender Loic Perrin sent off in the first half in his final game for the club before retirement.

Goal machine... Wissam Ben Yedder

With the likes of Reims, Lyon and Montpellier also harbouring big ambitions for the coming campaign, Bordeaux won't find it any easier this time around than they did last season. Having been dogged by off-the-field ownership problems and highly disgruntled fans for quite some time now, Girondins recently lost their director of football and only just managed to persuade coach Paulo Sousa to remain at the club. They'll need a lot of hard work and a fair slice of luck to turn things around.

Howard Johnson

> With his predecessor lasting less than seven months, Kovac will be under no less pressure [at Monaco] than he was in his previous role at Bayern Munich



Under pressure... new Monaco coach Niko Kovac

PROMOTED TEAMS

LORIENT
It was extremely tight at the top of Ligue 2 when Lorient were promoted as champions 28 games into last season. Coach Christophe Pelissier's side were on 54 points, one ahead of Lens and with just four points separating the top five teams. The vastly experienced Fabien Lemoine, formerly of Rennes and Saint-Etienne, will be a key player for them in Ligue 1.

LENS
It's good to see one of France's best-loved clubs back in the top flight after an absence of five years. Coach Franck Haise will be hoping that the notoriously fanatical fans of the "Blood And Golds" will give his side extra impetus in their bid to remain in Ligue 1.

New kings of Belgium

Making their mark... Club Brugge stunned Real Madrid with a 2-2 draw at the Bernabeu in October

Uncertainty, if not outright COVID-19 chaos, has proved the order of the day in Belgian football of late. Whether caused by panic, hesitancy, absence of leadership or judicial battles, the image of the game here has taken a real battering.

It's been a spring and summer of backroom adjudications, lawyers on the make, indecision and flux. The executive board of the Pro League dithering for six long weeks before finally holding a General Assembly to ratify the proposal that the championship be wound up early, scratching the last weekend of the regular season and play-off series. The title awarded to runaway leaders Club Brugge, with Waasland-Beveren, in last place at shutdown, successfully going to court to appeal against their demotion.

Only a week before the scheduled date of the 2020-21 kick-off, no one even knew how many teams would be competing in the new campaign. Would it be 16? Would it be 18? Pro League clubs ultimately plumped for the second option, increasing the runners and riders by two. No relegation for Waasland-Beveren and two clubs promoted from the second tier instead of one, with both promotion play-off finalists (OH Leuven and Beerschot) allowed to upgrade.

> Club Brugge, who only lost one league game in all last season, will again be the team to beat

The 18-team format will be valid for the next two campaigns. It will then revert to 16. This season, Belgium's play-offs for the title and Europa League qualification will involve fewer clubs than normal.

Flemish flag-carriers Club Brugge, who only lost one league game last season, will again be the team to beat. Having finished runners-up a record 25 times, the "*Blauw en Zwart*" (Blue and Blacks) have the potential to become Belgium's dominant force, winning three of the last five titles. Their ace in the hole is coach Philippe Clement. Responsible for Belgium's last two champions (Genk in 2018-19 and Club Brugge last term), he is one canny operator. Under him, Club are a force in any formation: 4-3-3, 3-5-2, or 4-5-1.

Within a framework of "all-for one, one-for-all" togetherness, Brugge have excellent individuals all over the park. Belgium keeper Simon Mignolet has bounced back superbly following his fall from grace at Liverpool; Angolan right-back or central defender Clinton Mata was deservedly voted their Player of the Year, and they boast a fine midfield engine room, manned by Mats Rits, skipper and assist king Ruud Vormer and Belgian Footballer of the Year Hans Vanaken. Definitely one to watch for the future is homegrown teenager Charles De Ketelaere, a left-footed No.10 of elegance and vision.

Despite their recent success, Brugge haven't won back-to-back titles since the '70s, so last season's runners-up, Gent, have a chance too. Their president Ivan De Witte is talking openly of a title push and he has sanctioned a raft of impressive summer signings, including highly-rated Charleroi full-back Nurio Fortuna and German striker Tim Kleindienst from Heidenheim.

Rocky start... Kompany has had a tough introduction to life at Anderlecht

The one fly in the ointment? Star striker Jonathan David has left to join Lille for €30 million.

Antwerp, Belgium's oldest club, are another outfit with serious aspirations. DR Congo striker Dieumerci Mboakani and Israeli attacking midfielder Lior Refaelov form a formidable goal-grabbing partnership and the morale in the camp received a timely preseason boost thanks to a 1-0 victory over Club Brugge in the national cup final, the game held over from the end of last term.

A big talking point around the Pro League is what Brussels giants Anderlecht have in store for us. So used to ruling the roost in these parts, with a record 34 titles to their name, *Les Mauves* endured a nightmarish campaign last term, finishing in a humiliating 8th place, their worst performance since 1937. It's been tough times all round at the Parc Astrid: financial losses of €27m in 2019, 30 staff redundancies and an increasing number of fans turning on veteran centre-back Vincent Kompany, who returned to his mother club in a blaze of publicity a year ago.

Kompany was brought in as player-manager in 2019, but was swiftly forced to share head coach duties with ex-Anderlecht and Belgium midfielder Franky Vercauteuren. The former Manchester City man has now ended his playing career, but the Purple-and-Whites' failure to qualify for Europe leaves him vulnerable, and a quick turnaround is needed.

Fortunately, the 34-times Belgian champions have a wonderful youth system. Full-back Killian Sardella, centre-back Marco Kana, midfielders Yari Verschaeren and Albert Sambi Lokonga, and wingers Jeremy Doku and Francis Amuzu are a guarantee of a brighter tomorrow.

Nick Bidwell

Bayern still hungry for more

History-makers... Bayern Munich are chasing their ninth title in a row

PLAYERS TO WATCH

JUDE BELLINGHAM
(Borussia Dortmund)
Yet another example of Dortmund's capacity to attract global golden boys. The word in Germany is that Bayern Munich were also interested in signing the 17-year-old midfielder from Birmingham City, but failed with a late bid.

SEBASTIAAN BORNAUW
(Cologne)
The Belgium Under-21 centre-back is assured of a bright future. Not only does he muzzle opposition forwards but he regularly appears on the scoresheet, bagging six in his first year with Cologne after leaving Anderlecht in 2019.

DANIEL CALIGIURI
(Augsburg)
Augsburg director of sport Stefan Reuter definitely pulled off a coup in bringing in the vastly experienced ex-Schalke midfielder and skipper on a free transfer. The sort of player fans love: hard-running and a never-say-die character.

ERMEDIN DEMIROVIC
(Freiburg)
The 22-year-old Bosnian forward was in fine form for Swiss outfit St. Gallen last season. Freiburg are renowned transfer-market bargain hunters, and will regard the €3.7 million they paid for Demirovic as a very sound investment.

MARTIN HINTEREGGER
(Eintracht Frankfurt)
If there was an award for the most underrated player in the Bundesliga, the Austria defender would certainly be a contender. Combative and aware, Hinteregger was the Bundesliga's top-scoring centre-back in 2019-20.

Ex-Bayern Munich and Germany playmaker Mario Basler has one basic message on the eve of the new Bundesliga campaign – don't expect Bayern's eight-year championship hegemony to crumble any time soon.

Basler, still as trenchant in his opinions as he was in his playing days, does not merely feel good about the Bavarians' exceptional squad. Equally, if not more important for Basler, is Bayern's remarkable desire and mental toughness.

In a recent interview with *France Football* magazine, Basler explained: "Winning is in the DNA of the club. When the situation demands it, Bayern players always step up to the mark. They adore these instances. While they are energised, other teams seem to shrink as the pressure mounts in the home stretch. Bayern have an appetite for success that has no limits. They are ravenously hungry.

"I fear that clubs like Dortmund and RB Leipzig are too inconsistent and fearful in the key moments to unseat Bayern. Take last season. Bayern had a terrible run of results in the autumn. Yet still managed to clinch the title."

> "Bayern players always step up to the mark…They have an appetite for success that has no limits"
>
> **Mario Basler**

What makes Bayern even more formidable at the moment is that they have the ideal coach in former Germany assistant Hansi Flick, someone perfectly in tune with the club's ethos and lofty expectations. Unlike his predecessor Niko Kovac, whom he replaced last November, Flick enjoys an infinitely better working relationship with the players. The feeling in the dressing room is that Flick is everything Kovac wasn't: an attack-conscious risk-taker, much clearer in his match-day instructions and a superior communicator.

Flick has revived Bayern in more or less every possible way. The football is more fluid, enterprising and attractive; work rate and tactical flexibility have improved enormously and after the collective hiccups of the Kovac era, the Reds suddenly are a slick, cohesive unit again.

Inevitably, all eyes at the Allianz Arena will be on striker extraordinaire Robert Lewandowski – who topped the Bundesliga scoring charts last term with 34 goals – and newly-acquired big-money winger Leroy Sane. The

Chasers…Haaland will lead Dortmund's title challenge

▲ HWANG HEE-CHAN
(RB Leipzig)
Speedy, creative and versatile, the 24-year-old South Korea forward has his first shot at the big time after impressing in Austria for RB Salzburg. 16 goals in 2019-20, he will need to increase his output to replace Timo Werner.

▲ LEROY SANE
(Bayern Munich)
The livewire Germany winger, a €45m purchase from Manchester City, is rightly described by Bayern CEO-elect Oliver Kahn as a "difference-making player". Bayern represents an acid test of his attitude and professionalism.

▲ MARCUS THURAM
(Borussia Monchengladbach)
Fresh from his first season in the German top flight in which he scored ten goals, set up eight and beat defenders with his powerful dribbling, the 22-year-old French winger or centre-forward now has to take it to the next level.

▲ LUCAS TOUSART
(Hertha Berlin)
Hertha Berlin broke their transfer record to sign the 23-year-old midfielder for €24m in January, but he remained on loan at Lyon for the rest of the season, scoring against Juventus in the Champions League last 16.

▲ FLORIAN WIRTZ
(Bayer Leverkusen)
At the age of 17, Wirtz is already dazzling with his sumptuous ability as a central playmaker or winger. Struck a dream goal for the Leverkusen youth team last year, firing home from the half-way line five seconds into a match.

Hot property... Nagelsmann is one of Europe's most wanted coaches

problem for opponents, though, is that the Bayern attacking threat stretches far, far wider. Last season, no fewer than 14 of their players were on the scoresheet in the Bundesliga.

Over the last two decades, just five Bundesliga coaches – Matthias Sammer and Jurgen Klopp at Dortmund, Thomas Schaaf (Werder Bremen), Armin Veh (Stuttgart) and Felix Magath (Wolfsburg) – have succeeded in knocking Bayern off their perch. Overtaking Bayern is akin to scaling Everest, but if any of the current batch of top-flight bosses has it in him to be an ace mountaineer, it has to be young RB Leipzig trainer Julian Nagelsmann.

As proven by RB's excellent results in the 2019-20 Champions League, Nagelsmann, 33, quite clearly knows what he's doing. His side have all the organisational bases covered, they are consummate shape-shifters, press with intelligence and intensity and break forward with panache and generosity. Although his squad is relatively raw, with an average age below 24, they perform with a great deal of maturity. That is to Nagelsmann's immense credit.

The all-important question for Leipzig is how successfully they fill the gap left by the sale to Chelsea of star striker Timo Werner, their number one supplier of attacking verve and potency, who netted 28 Bundesliga goals last term. They have turned to sister club RB Salzburg to sign South Korean forward Hwang Hee-chan, and believe that he can fill Werner's boots adequately.

In other good news for RB, much-coveted French centre-back Dayot Upamecano, rumoured to be on the radar of Bayern Munich and Arsenal, has signed a new deal, thus ending months of speculation.

Dortmund, German league runners-up in each of the last two seasons, would have to spectacularly self-destruct not to finish in the top three. They have an impressive squad, including several young guns with vast potential, carry significant attacking threat – netting a club-record 84 domestic league goals last season – and feature the best young striker in Europe in Erling Haaland.

Sadly for the Ruhr giants, they are light in certain areas. Their defence can be porous and they have a habit of losing focus, often found wanting in key moments. For all his admirable qualities as a tactician and teacher, coach Lucien Favre, about to begin his third season at the Westfalenstadion, now is running a credibility deficit, with fans and media types launching brickbats a plenty. Critics claim he is not the winner that Borussia need.

The coronavirus pandemic has hit the Dortmund wallet especially hard. The club posted a €45 million loss for the 2019-20 business year and chief executive Hans-Joachim Watzke accepts he will have to cut costs across the board: "The loss of revenue we're currently experiencing in all sectors is dramatic. We have to save as much as possible. For me it's an especially difficult chapter."

If Dortmund, one of Germany's best-run and well-resourced outfits, are having to watch the pennies, the alarm bells should be ringing for everybody.

Nick Bidwell

> If Dortmund, one of Germany's best-run and well-resourced outfits, are having to watch the pennies, the alarm bells should be ringing for everybody

PROMOTED TEAMS

ARMINIA BIELEFELD
The runaway second division champions are back in the top flight for the first time since 2009. Expertly led by coach Uwe Neuhaus, they achieved promotion thanks largely to the goals of strikers Fabian Klos (21) and Andreas Voglsammer (12). Their season could hinge on how the pair adapt to their first seasons in the Bundesliga at the ages of 32 and 28 respectively.

VFB STUTTGART
Certain teams just belong at the top table, and there are few bigger organisations in German football than Stuttgart, thrice winners of the Bundesliga and once featuring a host of *Nationalmannschaft* stars such as Hansi Muller, Guido Buchwald, Jurgen Klinsmann, Philipp Lahm and Sami Khedira. Their coach, Pellegrino Matarazzo, used to work under Julian Nagelsmann at Hoffenheim, and the Americans' attacking style has drawn comparisons with his former colleague.

Staying put... Upamecano has penned a new deal at RB Leipzig

All eyes on Arjen

Centre of attention... Arjen Robben

Forget Hakim Ziyech's transfer to Chelsea or any multi-million moves by several Ajax players when the transfer market recovers. Whatever happens, the most remarkable summer signing has been done by ninth-placed Groningen, where Arjen Robben will make his comeback.

Eighteen years after leaving his boyhood club, where he started at the age of 12, the 36-year-old winger is back home. Last year, Robben announced his retirement after a decade at Bayern Munich, but now he is back at the club where it all started.

Only 16 years old and still a high school student, Robben made his debut in 2000, playing 46 league matches and scoring eight goals in two seasons. By then he had already attracted many top clubs, and he opted for PSV, turning down Ajax. A highly-successful journey followed in the colours of Chelsea, Real Madrid and Bayern Munich. A career with loads of silverware including 11 league titles, six national cups and, of course, the Champions League, scoring the decider against Borussia Dortmund in 2013. Robben also has 96 caps for the Netherlands under his belt, being a key player at three European Championships and three World Cups. In the 2010 final, Iker Casillas prevented him from being the *Oranje's* ultimate World Cup hero.

When the Eredivisie starts, many will hope to see Arjen Robben in action against former club PSV on September 13

Robben's return has elements of a Cinderella story. He isn't opting for the Netherlands' traditional top three or a comeback at Bayern – Groningen are nothing more than a mediocre mid-table club.

The real question is whether he will have a fairy-tale ending or a huge disappointment. After all, throughout his career Robben has been injury prone. In his last four seasons he missed 60 matches. Robben remains optimistic: "I'm in better shape than I had expected", he said in preseason training. His fitness coach at Bayern, Holger Broich, also has no doubts.

One thing is for sure, he will be closely watched by many. That includes the new national coach – whoever Ronald Koeman's successor may be – who might see Robben as an option for the postponed European Championship.

Season tickets sales in Groningen have increased, but it is uncertain how many will see him in action, even when he is playing. Due to the COVID-19 measures, social distancing is necessary and that will decrease the capacity. It is even forbidden to cheer or chant during the matches. So far no club has found a clue how they can prevent fans from supporting their club.

Nevertheless, when the Eredivisie starts, many will hope to see Robben in action against former club PSV on September 13 – though perhaps not Eindhoven's new coach, Roger Schmidt.

The German is the best example of a new era of Eredivisie coaches who prefer a pressing style – a concept that is meticulously used at the Red Bull clubs. It was Schmidt's RB Salzburg side that totally outplayed Ajax back in 2014, and the Eindhoven club have turned to him in order to wipe out two trophy-less seasons. In doing so, PSV have swept aside their traditional concept of former players – such as Phillip Cocu and Mark van Bommel – learning the ropes in the youth section before moving up. The big question though, is whether the 53-year-old German has the players to have his ideas executed.

Pressing matters... Roger Schmidt

Vitesse, for years Chelsea's satellite club, have adopted a similar approach by appointing Thomas Letsch – Schmidt's former assistant at Salzburg – as head coach, while Johannes Spors, once of RB Leipzig, is their new director.

FC Twente almost followed by appointing another former Leipzig man Alexander Zorniger, but he withdrew. Instead came Ron Jans, who is looking for rehabilitation after resigning from FC Cincinatti following allegations that he used a racial slur.

At the top of the table, Ajax will be the main contenders for the title, providing they can keep their squad relatively stable, with AZ their main challengers. It's unclear whether Schmidt's new-look PSV can contend, while Feyenoord are the dark horses.

Former Rangers manager Dick Advocaat has got the Rotterdam side back on track after replacing Jaap Stam in October 2019, as he remained unbeaten in the Eredivisie until the league came to a standstill.

The 72-year-old is still going strong, even if Dutch fans have not forgotten him for making "the worst decision in Dutch football history" – substituting man of the match Robben in a Euro 2004 game against the Czech Republic, and turning a 2-1 lead turned into a 3-2 defeat.

Whether Robben's decision to return is set to be remembered in a similar way remains to be seen.

Klaas-Jan Droppert

More questions than answers in Serie A

Dumped out...Juve's Champions League defeat to Lyon cost Maurizio Sarri his job

PLAYERS TO WATCH

SANDRO TONALI
(Brescia)
Seemingly destined for Internazionale (although champions Juventus may get involved), Tonali looks like an invaluable midfield anchor, both in attack and defence. Has been praised by legends Marco Tardelli and Andrea Pirlo.

VICTOR OSIMHEN
(Napoli)
Osimhen arrives in Naples for a fee that could rise to €80m, making him the most expensive African footballer ever. 2019-20 was Napoli's lowest-scoring season for ten years, but the Nigeria striker should help change that.

SOFYAN AMRABAT
(Fiorentina)
The tireless midfield dynamo was the most surprising element in the already surprising Verona during his spell on loan from Club Brugge last season. Fiorentina were so impressed they paid €20m – a smart purchase.

NICOLO ZANIOLO
(Roma)
Long considered a great hope for Italian football, the 21-year-old is included here because this will be a delicate season for him as he comes back from a cruciate knee ligament injury. So far, the signs are very promising.

FEDERICO CHIESA
(Fiorentina)
Having opted to stay with Fiorentina 12 months ago, 22-year-old Chiesa is widely expected to be on the move next season. With 17 caps to his name, he will be a key member of Italy's Euro 2020 squad next summer.

Rarely has a new Serie A season prompted so many imponderables as the upcoming 2020-21 version, and not just because of COVID-19.

The season that just ended was turned on its head by the elimination of Juventus by Olympique Lyon at the last-16 stage of the Champions League in early August. Mighty shockwaves were generated by the realisation that the all-dominant Juventus, the club that had just lifted its ninth consecutive Italian title, had been eliminated by the seventh strongest club in France.

Has Italian football sunk that low? Is former Juventus, Roma, Milan and England coach Fabio Capello right when he says that Serie A is simply not competitive enough?

If you reflect that in recent seasons Juventus have twice finished 17 points clear of second place (in 2014 and 2015), then Capello might have a point. Furthermore, he also points out that for most of this last decade of Juventus dominance, the club's traditionally strongest rivals, the two Milan clubs, went missing, leaving it to Roma or Napoli to challenge the Old Lady.

Whatever the answers about the quality of Serie A, Juve did not hang around, sacking coach Maurizio Sarri the day after the Lyon elimination. Sarri's replacement, former Juventus great Andrea Pirlo – promoted immediately from the Under-23s – merely adds to the intrigue of an imponderable new season.

Has Italian football sunk that low? Is former Juventus, Roma, Milan and England coach Fabio Capello right when he says that Serie A is simply not competitive enough?

In the wake of both that defeat by Lyon and also a less than convincing end of season in Serie A, champions Juventus suddenly look, if not beatable, at least less intimidating. The questions abound. 41-year-old Pirlo was a wonderful player, indeed one of the all-time greats, but he has no coaching experience at all.

Outburst...Conte spoke out about poor planning at Inter

Will he be able to integrate the skills of Cristiano Ronaldo – one of the few positive notes of the Lyon disaster – with new boys such as 20-year-old Swede Dejan Kulusevski, one of the brightest stars in Italian football, and ex-Barcelona midfielder Arthur? Ronaldo turns 36 in February – can he continue on in his bionic way for another season?

Will Arthur and Kulusevski compensate for the departure of talented Bosnia playmaker, Miralem Pjanic? Swapped for Arthur in arguably the most extraordinary transfer of the summer – a deal that valued 24-year-old Arthur at €72 million and 30-year-old Pjanic at €60m.

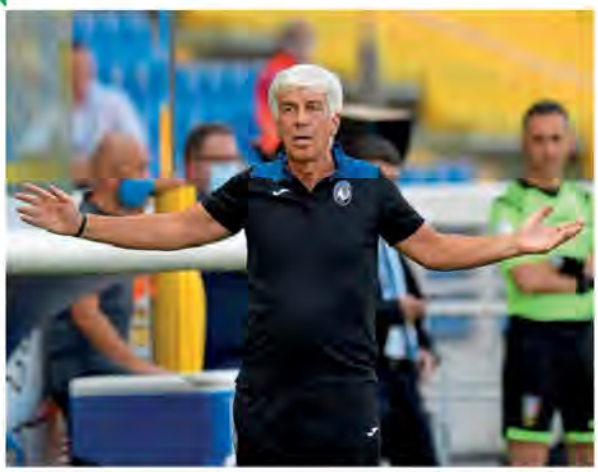
MARASH KUMBULLA
(Verona)
Born in Italy to Albanian parents, centre-back Kumbulla is another of Verona's success stories and likely to be an Inter player by the time the new season kicks off. He has opted to represent Albania at international level.

ZLATAN IBRAHIMOVIC
(Milan)
Ibrahimovic's footballing wisdom, professionalism and remarkable talent meant he was a vital figure last season for a resurgent Milan. The Swede turns 39 in October, but will probably continue to defy Father Time.

MIKKEL DAMSGAARD
(Sampdoria)
The versatile 20-year-old smashed in ten goals and assisted six for Danish side Nordsjaelland last season, playing as a winger, central midfielder or centre-forward. Samp agreed to sign him for €6.7m in February.

ALEJANDRO GOMEZ
(Atalanta)
We have said it on many occasions, but arguably no single player has contributed more to the Atalanta success story of the last five years than playmaker, assist-man, and goalscorer "Papu". We expect more of the same.

DANIEL MALDINI
(Milan)
Son of Paolo and grandson of Cesare, Daniel is the most recent member of this footballing dynasty to play for Milan, having made his debut in a 1-1 draw with Verona in February. There may well be more to come.



Master coach... Atalanta head coach Gian Piero Gasperini

Have the Old Lady got a €12m bargain for a player six years younger? On the football front, you have to think that Juve will miss the mercurial skills of Pjanic, leaving much to ride on the shoulders not only of Kulusevski and the talented Rodrigo Bentancur, but also on Paulo Dybala, arguably the best player in Serie A last season.

On the economic front, however, the deal looks like a handy way to mutually inflate one another's balance sheets.

Prior to the Lyon debacle, a seemingly tired Juventus had flashed distress signs in defeats by Milan and Udinese, as well as in draws with Atalanta and Sassuolo, all results that slowed up their eventual winning of the title. It might be considered heresy in certain parts of Turin, but perhaps the Juventus defence has problems. Are the old lions, 33-year-old Leonardo Bonucci and 36-year-old Giorgio Chiellini, starting to show their age? Is 21-year-old Matthijs de Ligt ready to step up after a difficult first season?

As for their rivals, they may take encouragement from the fact that Juve's winning margin of just one point over second-placed Inter was the lowest of the last nine years. At this point, you have to think that Inter could become credible title challengers next season – especially after their recent Europa League heroics.

The last team to finish ahead of Juventus, they have the economic clout of retailer Suning, China's third-largest private company, on their side. In all probability, they will still have the driving force of accomplished coach Antonio Conte. On top of that, with Romelu Lukaku, Lautaro Martinez, Christian Eriksen, Alexis Sanchez, Diego Godin, Marcelo Brozovic, Samir Handanovic and Stefan de Vrij, they already have an international squad strong enough to lift the title.

Frankly, it is hard to make a case for any other club. Third-placed Atalanta performed miracles to get as far as they have, but is it not asking too much to expect even more from them? That is said, too, notwithstanding the outstanding quality of coach, Gian Piero Gasperini, arguably the current maestro of the Italian coaching class.

For fourth-placed Lazio, too, it is hard to imagine they could do any better than in the season just ended. Remember, before the COVID-19 lockdown, Lazio even threatened Juventus, beating them twice in two weeks before Christmas, once in Serie A and again in the Italian Super Cup.

Former Milan and Italy striker, Pippo Inzaghi, back in Serie A next season as coach to Serie B winners, Benevento, even suggested that Lazio, coached by his younger brother Simone, would have won the title were it not for the lockdown. He argues that in a normal end of season, Lazio would have been playing just once a week at a time when Juve would have been playing twice as much, given their Champions League involvement. That advantage would have compensated for the fact that Juve clearly had the larger and stronger overall squad.

Atalanta performed miracles to get as far as they have, but is it not asking too much to expect even more from them?

The rest? Roma, under the new US ownership of billionaire Dan Friedkin; Napoli, galvanised by coach Rino Gattuso; Milan, with coach Stefano Pioli, mentor Zlatan Ibrahimovic and goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma all still on board; Fiorentina with Sofyan Amrabat, Dusan Vlahovic and Federico Chiesa at their disposal – all four clubs clearly hope to do better next season. But are they ready to challenge Juventus? We have our doubts.

Paddy Agnew

PROMOTED TEAMS

BENEVENTO
Coached by former Juventus, Milan and Italy striker Filippo Inzaghi, the emphatic Serie B winners are back in Serie A, two seasons after their only previous top-flight experience, when they lost their first 14 matches. Defensive experience will need to be added in order to put up a better challenge this time around, hence the signing of experienced Poland centre-back Kamil Glik from Monaco.

CROTONE
The Calabrian side, like Benevento, have little experience of Serie A, having played just two seasons (2016-17 and 2017-18). Crotone coach, former Milan player Giovanni Stroppa, may rely on key elements in his current side such as 37-year-old goalkeeper Alex Cordaz and ex-Juve defender Luca Marrone.

SPEZIA
There will be a new name in Serie A next season – Spezia, promoted to Serie A for the first time in their 114-year history. The Eagles drew 1-1 over two legs with Frosinone in the play-off final, but were given the victory by virtue of finishing higher in the league. They are likely to play in Cesena or Brescia while their own ground is renovated.

Golden Shoe... can Immobile fire Lazio to another title challenge?

Dzyuba spearheading Zenit hat-trick

Star man...Artem Dzyuba is staying at Zenit after firing them to last season's title

Zenit St. Petersburg director general Alexander Medvedev, once a prominent tennis tournament administrator, certainly has been producing lots of winning volleys as he seeks to lay the foundations for a third consecutive Russian Premier League title for the Blue-White-Sky Blues.

If Zenit fans are buoyantly optimistic of completing a hat-trick of title wins in 2020-21, much of that confidence flows from Medvedev's successful contract renewal talks with talismanic target man and club captain Artem Dzyuba, who recently inked a two-year extension with the option of a further 12 months. The 31-year-old, whose contract was due to expire this summer, had been linked with a move to Italy or England. His departure would have ripped the heart out of the Zenit attack, after topping both the goal and assist charts in Russia in 2019-20, but as it is, his productive front-line partnership with the lively Iranian Sardar Azmoun can continue.

> Spartak know they are taking a risk with the tainted golden boy of Russian football...but nevertheless feel Kokorin has a genuine shot at redemption

Medvedev deserves plenty of credit too for his work on the recruitment front, especially with regard to his £10.9 million swoop for defender Dejan Lovren from Liverpool. The Croatia centre-back may have spent most of last term on the Anfield bench, but at 31, is far from a spent force. His vast experience, bristling will-to-win and supreme self-confidence is just what the Zenit doctor ordered.

Lovren will step straight into the shoes of the veteran Serb Branislav Ivanovic, who was allowed to walk away from St. Petersburg as a free agent. Ivanovic was not the only big-name player to head for the Zenit exit this summer. Also decamping were a long-serving pair of Russian internationals: right-back Igor Smolnikov, who was promptly picked up by high-flying Krasnodar, and left-sided midfielder Oleg Shatov, whose next assignment will be to spark a revival at mid-table Rubin Kazan.

Will new Lokomotiv Moscow coach Marko Nikolic prove as bankable this season as he did in the final few weeks of last term? Pundits are divided, though the smart money says he has a fighting chance. When Nikolic was appointed in June to replace iconic Lokomotiv boss Igor Semin, many fans of the Railwaymen were not at all keen, of the opinion that the Serb – who had previously been employed in his native land, Slovenia and Hungary – did not have the stature to take over.

But how wrong that verdict turned out to be, with Nikolic's side remaining undefeated in his first eight games in charge. Lokomotiv ended the campaign in second, and qualification for the Champions League has brought Nikolic some much-needed respect and breathing space. Now comes the hard part: carrying on in the same vein.

A cool, rather aloof character, Nikolic will take heart from the excellent individual quality at his disposal: evergreen Croat central defender Vedran Corluka, Polish engine room co-ordinator Grzegorz Krychowiak, midfield enforcer Dmitri Barinov and the creative Miranchuk twins, Aleksei and Anton. The Railwaymen believe they have unearthed a gem in the shape of 18-year-old wing wizard Jasurbek Jaloliddinov, a recent signing from top Uzbek side Bunyodkor.

Bouncing back... Aleksandr Kokorin is attempting to rebuild his career

Unsurprisingly, forwards have featured heavily in the transfer market done deal column. CSKA Moscow, anxious to end their four-year league title drought, spent £7.65m on promising young Argentina striker Adolfo Gaich from San Lorenzo. Rostov acquired combative Macedonia U23 forward David Toshevski, a teenage tyro who had been interesting French club Lille. And in arguably the most sensational piece of business of the summer, Spartak Moscow struck a zero cost deal with Zenit for bad boy striker Aleksandr Kokorin.

After serving a prison spell in 2019 for assault, Kokorin, 29, enjoyed a rewarding five-month loan stint with Sochi this spring, scoring seven league goals in ten games. Without his sterling efforts, Sochi surely would have been relegated from the top flight. Spartak, who came a disappointing seventh last season, know they are taking a risk with the tainted golden boy of Russian football. They know he has a history of controversy and scandal. But nevertheless feel he has a genuine shot at redemption. No question about Kokorin's talent. Shame that his attitude and professionalism has so often been lacking.

It will be interesting to see how newly-promoted Khimki fare in the top flight. The Red-Blacks were magnificent in last season's Russian Cup, knocking out a string of elite clubs before unluckily losing 1-0 to Zenit in the final. The showpiece result really could have gone either way. Expect more giant-killing acts from them in the RPL.

Nick Bidwell

The second coming of Jesus

It was a traumatic end of season for Benfica. A disastrous run of unprecedented proportions either side of the pandemic-induced interruption – just two victories in 13 matches between February and the end of June – saw the Lisbon giants first limp out of Europe meekly, then throw away the league title to arch-rivals Porto. The miserable campaign culminated in them also losing the Portuguese Cup final to the Dragons, despite playing against ten men for almost an hour.

Something momentous was required to assuage the ire of the Benfica fans and president Luis Filipe Vieira, up for re-election in October, knew it. Benfica's woes, Vieira's need for a trump card and the catastrophic consequences of COVID-19 in Brazil combined to wrench Jorge Jesus from his highly-successful tenure at Flamengo to return to the club where he made his name.

A segment of Benfica's fans strongly opposed the reappointment of the charismatic 66-year-old. He had departed from the Estadio da Luz in acrimonious circumstances in 2015, sensationally signing for cross-town rivals Sporting. But the vast majority of *Benfiquistas* welcomed back with open arms the man who did more than any other to restore the historical club to the top domestically and make them competitive in Europe. All while getting the team playing an electrifying brand of swashbuckling football true to its attacking traditions.

Returning... Jorge Jesus

Bouncing back...Benfica

PLAYERS TO WATCH

▲ RUBEN DIAS
(Benfica)
The lynchpin of both Benfica and Portugal's defence, the highly-rated centre-back can expect to take his game to the next level under the guidance of Jorge Jesus.

▲ WENDERSON GALENO
(Braga)
With Braga's golden boy Francisco Trincao sold to Barcelona, the exceptionally skilful Brazilian winger can now take centre stage at the ever-ascending club.

▲ JOVANE CABRAL
(Sporting)
The thrilling form he showed at the end of 2019-20 has whetted the appetite for more spectacular goals and explosive moments from the Cape Verdean-born winger.

In his first interview upon arriving back in the Portuguese capital, coach Jesus was more than happy to air his characteristically high assessment of his own capabilities. "We're going to crush the opposition," he told in-house channel *BTV*. "We want to win everything, because I'm used to winning everything. And we want to win international trophies. I haven't come to Benfica for my retirement. I've come to win."

Easier said than done. Even during Jesus' six-year spell at Benfica, which coincided with heavy investment in the squad, Porto ended up champions of Portugal three times. More recently, and despite being hamstrung by crippling

Reigning champions...Porto last defended the title in 2012-13

finances, the Blue and Whites have beaten their foes from the capital to the crown in two of the last three seasons under Sergio Conceicao, a coach who personifies the northerners' fiercely competitive identity.

Conceicao's future was cast in doubt earlier this summer, with reports linking him to former club Internazionale. Should he depart, he would leave Porto in better shape than he found them. Conceicao got the most out of a cluster of experienced high-quality performers in Alex Telles, Jesus Corona, Danilo and Agustin Marchesin, and is gradually ushering in a vintage crop of youngsters who lifted the UEFA Youth League trophy in 2018-19.

> "We're going to crush the opposition. We want to win everything, because I'm used to winning everything...I haven't come to Benfica for my retirement. I've come to win"
>
> Returning Benfica coach Jorge Jesus

Huge expectations surround the likes of Fabio Silva, Romario Baro, and Diogo Leite among others. The big question for Porto is whether or not these young stars, and Conceicao himself, will stick around at the Estadio do Dragao. Rumours abound that Porto will look to cash in on one or more of their talented youth players to balance the books.

With Benfica doing a U-turn in their youth policy by appointing Jesus, well-known for his reticence when it comes to trusting young players, and the future of Porto's starlets up in the air, Sporting are set to resume their historical role as the club that most invests in its homegrown talent.

To be blunt, it is the only aspect of Portuguese football where the Lions may come out on top. Chronic mismanagement at boardroom level and a complete lack of direction led to another dismal season for Sporting, further widening the chasm to the two perennial title contenders. The appointment of rookie coach Ruben Amorim initially gave the club a boost, but it was no great surprise when Braga – Amorim's former club – stole third place on goal difference at the finishing tape.

Sporting have vowed to go back to basics and make its academy players the core of its team, and the final weeks of the season did at least give the club a few rays of hope of a better future. Amorim's decision to select players almost entirely in the 17-22 age bracket upon the resumption of football in June enabled teenage defenders Nuno Mendes and Eduardo Quaresma to showcase their indisputable potential, and winger Jovane Cabral to lay bare the folly of discarding academy players. Cabral had started his career brilliantly in early 2018-19, only to be inexplicably pushed out of the team by a series of expensively-recruited transfer punts. When given a second chance and restored to the line-up in 2020, he was one of the best players not only of Sporting, but in Portugal as a whole, winning the Player of the Month award in June.

Nevertheless, so far have Sporting fallen, that reclaiming third place from an effervescent Braga next season will be seen as progress.

Tom Kundert

Ten is the magic number

Hat-trick hero... Edouard scored three goals against Hamilton

Scottish football's fascination with numbers has taken on a new twist. Celtic's quest for a record tenth successive title is no longer the only talking point: "Celtic 10" now has "COVID-19" for company.

The 2020-21 Scottish Premiership season is now shaped by the pandemic and its financial impact on every club. A week before the campaign started, newspaper back pages had transfers pushed out by Aberdeen announcing wage cuts of £1 million to plug a £10m shortfall.

However, three weeks into the season, games were postponed – not by the football authorities (SFA and SPFL) but by the Scottish Government - after Aberdeen and Celtic players broke strict COVID-19 rules on self-isolation.

Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said the punishment was "a yellow card – next time, it's red." St. Mirren v Celtic and Aberdeen v Hamilton were axed, as was the visit of Aberdeen to Celtic. Aberdeen's second game, at St. Johnstone, was called off when it was revealed eight players had gone to a bar after the game with Rangers and two had tested positive.

> "We need more. I have told the club that"
> Steven Gerrard, Rangers manager

Celtic were then plunged into crisis when defender Boli Bolingoli, took a secret 24-hour holiday to Spain, hid his "crime" from manager Neil Lennon and trained all week with team-mates before being used as a substitute in the 1-1 draw at Kilmarnock.

Bolingoli will never play for Celtic again. "This is the worst behaviour I have come across," said Lennon. "It is a betrayal of my trust. The other players are so angry. All their hard work in preseason halted by one act of selfishness."

If Celtic winning the title for nine seasons added a touch of familiarity, the "new normal" includes the absence of fans in a country which relies on matchday crowds most. There would usually be 60,000 at Celtic Park when the champions hoist the league flag, but this time, Lennon's side had the surreal backdrop of silence for their 5-1 victory over Hamilton Academical.

Fans – who return to stadia on September 14 - of all clubs made impressive efforts to buy season tickets, with no guarantees of being able to watch. Not just a gesture of faith, but to provide much-needed income; from Celtic's 53,000 to Motherwell's 4,000.

Celtic have financial comfort of several good years – record £101m turnover in 2018 – posting combined profits of £29m in two seasons, but Lennon's players also took pay cuts. Celtic felt they could not be making multi-million pound signings when their own staff had been furloughed and supporters' jobs had been hit by COVID-19. However, in August they spent £5m on Greek goalkeeper Vasilis Barkas from AEK Athens after Craig Gordon moved to Hearts (and Fraser Forster's Southampton loan ended), and £5m on Swiss striker Albian Ajeti from West Ham. Lennon is determined to keep hold of prized striker Odsonne Edouard.

Trying to pursue Celtic, Rangers tripled their costs in three years. Even though turnover rose as they reached the last 16 of the Europa League, Steven Gerrard's first two seasons at Ibrox saw the club lose £25m.

Under pressure... Rangers are desperate to stop rivals Celtic

It seems likely that Gerrard will sacrifice his top scorer, Alfredo Morelos, who agreed personal terms with Lille only for the clubs to fail to agree a fee. The only major acquisition is former Leeds United striker, Kemar Roofe, who cost €5m from Anderlecht, to supplement the permanent signing of midfielder Ianis Hagi, son of Romania legend Gheorghe. Hagi was loaned from Genk last season and moves for £3m. "We need more," Gerrard insisted. "I have told the club that. Where we're at from a financial point of view, they are questions for other people."

At Aberdeen, Derek McInnes is the longest-serving manager in Scotland's top flight, with four second-place finishes for a fraction of what Rangers spent. McInnes re-signed Jonny Hayes, three years after selling him to Celtic for £1m, and the winger has agreed to defer his wages for a year. However, Hayes and striker Sam Cosgrove have now incurred McInnes' anger as two of "The Aberdeen Eight." The Dons had accepted a £2m offer from Guingamp for Cosgrove but he chose to stay, much to chairman Dave Cormack's frustration.

Dundee United return to the top flight after a four-year absence, winning the Championship by 14 points. Scottish champs in 1983 and UEFA Cup finalists in 1987, they are eager to flourish again. Manager Robbie Neilson made a shock return to Hearts, prompting the Tannadice club to bring in Micky Mellon from Tranmere Rovers. It is the 48-year-old's first taste of football in his homeland, having spent his playing and coaching career in England.

Phil Gordon

Istanbul revolution

Still flush with the euphoria of clinching their first-ever Super Lig crown, Istanbul Basaksehir now have their sights on the next part of their master plan – establishing a domestic dynasty.

For Basaksehir, only a top-flight side for a mere six years, it's simply not enough to savour this one intense moment of glory, or to bask in the warm glow of putting traditional Istanbul big-hitters (Fenerbahce, Besiktas and Galatasaray) in their place. The orange-shirted interlopers aim to shake up the Turkish football hierarchy for good.

The new Turkish champions, located in the western Istanbul suburb of Basaksehir, have good reason to believe they have the necessary staying power. Although not the most spectacular of sides, they have other ways of getting the job done. They are tremendously consistent, play a controlled possession game, make excellent use of the wings, and have the most balanced team in the country – and all with a group of players who cost less than €8 million.

Under coach Okan Buruk, champion in his inaugural season at the helm, the recipe for success is not likely to change to any great degree. At Basaksehir, they put a premium on battle-hardened experience, with veteran Slovakia centre-back Martin Skrtel calling the shots in defence, Franco-African duo of Enzo Crivelli and Demba Ba expertly leading the line, and the much-underrated Bosnian Edin Visca combining creativity and goal threat from the right flank. 25-year-old playmaker Irfan Kahveci, one of the exceptions to the senior citizen rule, is also making quite a name for himself at the moment.

Last season, the champions had one of the oldest squads in the Super Lig, with an average age of over 29.8, thanks in no small part to the presence of a trio of golden oldies: the Brazilian flyer Robinho, ex-Napoli and Leicester City midfielder Gokhan Inler and Dutch winger Eljero Elia.

While Basaksehir are a model of financial and organisational stability, the same cannot be said of Istanbul's "Big Three". The proud recipients of no fewer than 54 Turkish league titles, Besiktas, Fenerbahce and Galatasaray are sinking in a sea of unpaid bills. The trio currently have combined debts of 6.5 billion Turkish lira (€793m), each has been guilty of Financial Fair-Play infractions, and all have taken to missing salary payments. German attacker Max Kruse, for example, recently had his contract with Fenerbahce rescinded after wage commitments did not materialise.

Rising force...Istanbul Basaksehir won their first Super Lig title in July

With next to no cash for expensive foreign recruits, the competitiveness of the Istanbul powerhouses has inevitably waned. One need only look at the massive gap that Basaksehir opened up over the Big Three in last season's Super Lig. Besiktas – who to their credit, always looked to attack – finished third, seven points adrift of top spot. Sixth-placed Galatasaray were 13 points behind, while Fenerbahce finished seventh, 19 points in arrears.

> While Basaksehir are a model of financial and organisational stability, the same cannot be said of Istanbul's "Big Three"

Trabzonspor could turn out to be the main challengers for the title. The Black Sea outfit were Super Lig pacesetters for much of last term – on course for their first title in 36 years – only for the wheels to come off when the league resumed after the three-month coronavirus hiatus. The former Chelsea midfielder and assistant boss Eddie Newton is Trabzonspor's new permanent coach. He was appointed as a caretaker towards the end of last term and immediately struck gold, steering the club to victory in the Turkish Cup final, a 2-0 victory over Alanyaspor.

Instilling a killer instinct has to be Newton's top priority. Last season, they threw away an incredible 30 points in games in which they led.

The 2020-21 Super Lig will be a well-stocked affair, with 21 participants rather than the usual 18. After initially insisting in May that they had no intention of abolishing relegation from the top flight, the Turkish football authorities ended up doing just that. Normally the bottom-three – Malatyaspor, Kayserispor and Ankaragucu – would have been unceremoniously demoted. Little wonder their sighs of relief could be heard for miles. Coming up from the second tier are Hatayspor, Erzurumspor and Fatih Karagumruk. In 2020-21, four teams will be relegated from the Super Lig.

Nick Bidwell

Cup-winner...former Chelsea assistant Eddie Newton

A new era of dominance?

While there is more to La Liga than the top two, the stats do not lie: 15 of the last 16 La Liga titles have been lifted by either Barcelona or Real Madrid. Atletico Madrid have pushed and barged their way into the top three under Diego Simeone, while we have to go back to 2004 for Valencia's last title.

It's fair to say that Barca owned the 2010s, lifting six of the last ten titles, but if anybody is going to own the next decade it is more likely to be Real.

Their ten consecutive league wins post-lockdown made them worthy champions, but their superiority over Barca was well summed up on social media in the final week of the season.

Before their encounter with Alaves, the Catalan club posted their usual first-team squad graphic to Twitter, featuring just five substitutes, including two goalkeepers and emergency signing Martin Braithwaite – misspelt "Braihwaite".

In contrast, Real's tweet boasted a 22-man squad graphic with eight attacking players, five of whom aged 24 or younger, and still no room for Gareth Bale, Eden Hazard or James Rodriguez.

It marked a stark contrast in the two clubs' squad depths, and highlighted the failure of Barcelona's transfer policy, while also suggesting a new era of dominance could lie ahead for Real.

It highlighted the failure of Barca's transfer policy, while also suggesting a new era of dominance for Real

Messi...rumours are rife that Barca's key player could leave the Nou Camp

It is no exaggeration to say that Barca are in total upheaval. Change was already on the horizon, but the 8-2 humiliation at the hands of Bayern Munich exacerbated the need for radical and immediate action.

Quique Setien was straight out of the door, replaced by Ronald Koeman, as was sporting director Eric Abidal. Many players could follow. Barca have several stars over 30, including new signing Miralem Pjanic, plus the likes of Gerard Pique, Jordi Alba, Sergio Busquets, Ivan Rakitic, Arturo Vidal and Luis Suarez. President Bartomeu insisted that only certain "untouchables" would be safe.

What he did not expect was for one of those untouchables to announce his intention to leave.

The future of Lionel Messi is Barca's most pressing concern. He is still their ➤

PLAYERS TO WATCH

▲ JOAO FELIX
(Atletico Madrid)
Sealed a record move to Atletico as a replacement for Antoine Griezmann, then made *Marca's* most disappointing team of the season. Doesn't turn 21 until November, so has plenty of time to win over doubters in 2020-21.

▲ JOAQUIN
(Real Betis)
The 39-year-old club captain and La Liga icon is entering the last year of his contract, and is expected to finally retire at the end of the season – once he's broken Betis' all-time appearance record of 378 games.

▲ MARTIN ODEGAARD
(Real Madrid)
Real simply had to recall Odegaard early from his loan at Real Sociedad – he was arguably La Liga's best midfielder in 2019-20. The Norway international will relish the challenge of testing himself in the Champions League.

▲ DARWIN MACHIS
(Granada)
Probably one of the most underrated attackers in the Spanish league, the Venezuela forward will be crucial if Granada are to manage back-to-back top-half La Liga finishes. Scored seven goals and assisted five in 2019-20.

▲ GERARD MORENO
(Villarreal)
Struck twice on the final day of 2019-20 to win the Zarra Trophy with 18 goals – awarded to La Liga's top-scoring Spaniard. The 28-year-old is an outsider for Spain's Euro squad, having scored three goals in three international games.

Tables turned...are Real set to replace Barca as La Liga's dominant club?

LUCAS OCAMPOS
(Sevilla)
Completed a stunningly mature first season in La Liga with 14 goals in 31 starts, including excellent strikes in both derbies against Real Betis. Aged 26, he has the potential to build on an impressive start to life in Spain.

MIKEL OYARZABAL
(Real Sociedad)
The winger was the only player other than Messi to record double figures for assists in the 2019-20 season, and his flying form continues to catch the eye of both Spain's selectors and scouts from Europe's biggest clubs.

RIQUI PUIG
(Barcelona)
Alongside Ansu Fati, the academy product was a bright spot in an otherwise disappointing campaign for Barcelona. Tipped as the heir to Andres Iniesta's throne, he could be a mainstay in a new-look midfield.

OIHAN SANCET
(Athletic Bilbao)
The 20-year-old became the first player born in the 2000s to score in La Liga for Bilbao in 2020, and has the opportunity to establish himself as a regular in midfield after starting nine league matches in 2019-20.

VINICIUS JR.
(Real Madrid)
The unpredictable winger is capable of producing game-changing moments of magic, but must improve his end product if he is to establish himself for Real. He managed just three goals and one assist in La Liga in 2019-20.

best player, providing a record 21 La Liga assists in 2019-20 and winning his seventh *Pichichi*, another record.

His transfer request in August sent shockwaves around the world. Triggered by that humiliation against Bayern, as well as the alleged mistreatment of his close friend Suarez, Messi made it clear that he wanted to leave the Nou Camp.

At the time of writing, his situation remains uncertain. But whatever happens, Barcelona need to start planning for a Messi-less future. Even if he stays another season, the 33-year-old can't carry them forever. Replacing him will be the job of the decade, and one that the current board does not look up to solving.

The rise of *La Masia* products Riqui Puig and Ansu Fati, plus the acquisitions of Pedri and Francisco Trincao, mean there is exciting talent at the club, but more needs to emerge. And soon.

Meanwhile, Real Madrid supporters watch on with glee.

Los Blancos also have their own stars heading towards the end of their careers – Sergio Ramos and Luka Modric will be 35 at the end of 2020-21, while Karim Benzema turns 33 in December. Yet there's still a strong base of first-teamers in their 20s who can step up in a period of transition – the likes of Marco Asensio, Raphael Varane and Federico Valverde spring to mind – while returning loanee Martin Odegaard has the world at his feet. Eder Militao, Sergio Reguilon, Brahim Diaz, Vinicius Jr. and Rodrygo are all promising youngsters too.

Real's long-term future looks bright, but their imminent objective is to retain their title. Given the situation at Barca, it is difficult to see who will stop them.

Atletico remain in transition, with their squad having undergone a refresh in the summer of 2019. They're still one of the most defensively-capable units in Europe, but Diego Simeone needs more from his attackers if they are to challenge for the title. With Alvaro Morata and Diego Costa scoring just 17 league goals combined last season, a heavier responsibility must fall on their 20-year-old record signing Joao Felix – about to embark on just his third season as a professional footballer.

Europa League champions Sevilla were another side to undertake a squad overhaul last summer, with the likes of Jules Kounde, Diego Carlos and Lucas Ocampos excelling in their debut seasons. They'll want to continue where they left off, while juggling the added pressure of Champions League football.

Villarreal had to settle for a place in this season's Europa League, but are in safe hands – new coach Unai Emery famously won the competition three seasons running while in charge of Sevilla. The Basque coach has something to prove after a largely unsuccessful spell in the Premier League with Arsenal, although he inherits a squad who have just lost their main creative fulcrum in departed playmaker Santi Cazorla.

Real Sociedad and Granada join The Yellow Submarine in Europe's second competition, and it is the former who will most fancy their chances. In Mikel Merino, Mikel Oyarzabal and Alexander Isak, they boast some of 2019-20's best performers – while new boy David Silva will be tasked to replace the creativity lost with Odegaard's return to Madrid.

One club that on paper should be aiming for a European place next season is Valencia, although on-pitch matters have been clouded by administrative and financial debacles in recent years. The sale of their academy gem Ferran Torres to Manchester City for as little as £21 million is just one example of that.

With so many flaws in their main title rivals, another seasons of success looms large for Real Madrid. It could set the tone for the decade.

Jared Tinslay

Real Sociedad... the Basque side will sorely miss Odegaard

Unai Emery has something to prove after a largely unsuccessful spell in the Premier League with Arsenal

Point to prove... Unai Emery

PROMOTED TEAMS

HUESCA
After being relegated from La Liga in 2018-19, Huesca bounced straight back up as champions of Segunda Division. Premier League-winning forward with Leicester, Shinji Okazaki, finished as the club's top scorer in all competitions last season, but doubts remain as to whether the 34-year-old will be able to cut it in La Liga.

CADIZ
Known as the "Carnival City" for its famous February celebrations, the Andalusian club return to La Liga for the first time since 2006. One of the most popular sides in Spain, they only bear a slight grudge with regional rivals Sevilla. Interestingly, they are one of only three La Liga clubs that Leo Messi has failed to score against.

ELCHE
Elche sneaked into the play-offs on the last day of the season, after Fuenlabrada's match with Deportivo was postponed. Relegated Depor eventually won the rearranged game, providing Elche a path back to the top tier after five years away.

Dynamo in disarray over new coach

Team to beat... Shakhtar are chasing their fifth league title in a row

Most teams prepare for a new season by working on their fitness and fine tuning in friendlies. Ukraine's most decorated side Dynamo Kiev – 15 times national champions since independence in 1991 – are currently trying a different approach, fomenting their very own backyard civil war.

The spark which ignited the conflict in Kiev was the recent decision of Dynamo owner Ihor Surkis to bring in the veteran Romanian Mircea Lucescu as coach. Nothing wrong with that, you might think; the 75-year-old Lucescu has a brilliant track record as a team leader in his homeland, Italy, Turkey, and Russia, as well as Ukraine itself. Either through naivety or sheer bloody mindedness, it did not seem to register with Surkis that the Lucescu appointment was decidedly unpopular within the Dynamo community. In the eyes of many supporters, it simply wasn't acceptable to recruit Lucescu, a man who, for 12 seasons (2004-2016) had been in charge of arch-rivals Shakhtar Donetsk.

> **A never-ending flow of critical columns in the local press; angry fans descending on the club's HQ; hard-core ultra fans threatening the new coach with total hostility**

Soon the perfect storm was brewing. A never-ending flow of critical columns in the local press; angry fans descending on the club's HQ; hard-core ultra fans threatening the new coach with total hostility. Lucescu tendered his resignation just four days after signing – only to then sensationally retract after being talked around by Surkis. It's difficult to imagine the Dynamo of 2020-21 prospering in such a toxic atmosphere. Sooner or later, the volcano will erupt again.

In one of the most intriguing aspects of the affair, Dynamo even thought it wise to put all their email exchanges with Lucescu into the public domain. "I'm prepared to overcome the difficulties if I have the support of a person like you," Lucescu told Surkis. "I take note of your unbreakable faith in the development of Dynamo Kiev."

Unpopular...Lucescu returns to Ukraine four years after leaving

Internal bloodletting was the last thing Dynamo needed. Once a European powerhouse, capable of going toe-to-toe with the continent's best teams, they have been in the doldrums for quite some time. They have not won the Ukraine Premier League since 2016 and for far too long, have had to play second fiddle to Shakhtar, a role they have grown heartily sick of. Dynamo do have their share of rising stars, notably right-winger Viktor Tsygankov, midfielder Mykola Shaparenko, left-back Vitaliy Mykolenko and central defender Mykyta Burda. The unfortunate truth, though, is that they simply cannot match Shakhtar for squad depth and game-changing performers. Another major problem is the fate of promising young striker Artem Besedin, who was handed a 12-month ban for a doping offence in May.

Shakhtar, top dogs in each of the last four seasons, have too much quality to slip up. The Miners are a country mile ahead of the rest of the top-flight pack. And so they should be with a coach of the calibre of the Portuguese technician Luis Castro, an infinite amount of Champions League experience, and oodles of finesse, speed and firepower in the attacking third.

Their fortunes will be inextricably linked to their large contingent of Brazilian-born talent. Between them, naturalised Ukrainians Junior Moraes and Marlos struck 33 league goals last season, with wingers Taison and Tete next on the club's list of top scorers, while all-action midfielder Marcos Antonio and attacking right-back Dodo are both set to become key players at the Donbass Arena. Adventurous left-back Ismaily damaged cruciate ligaments this summer and is out until the New Year, so converted winger Marquinhos Cipriano is likely to take up the slack.

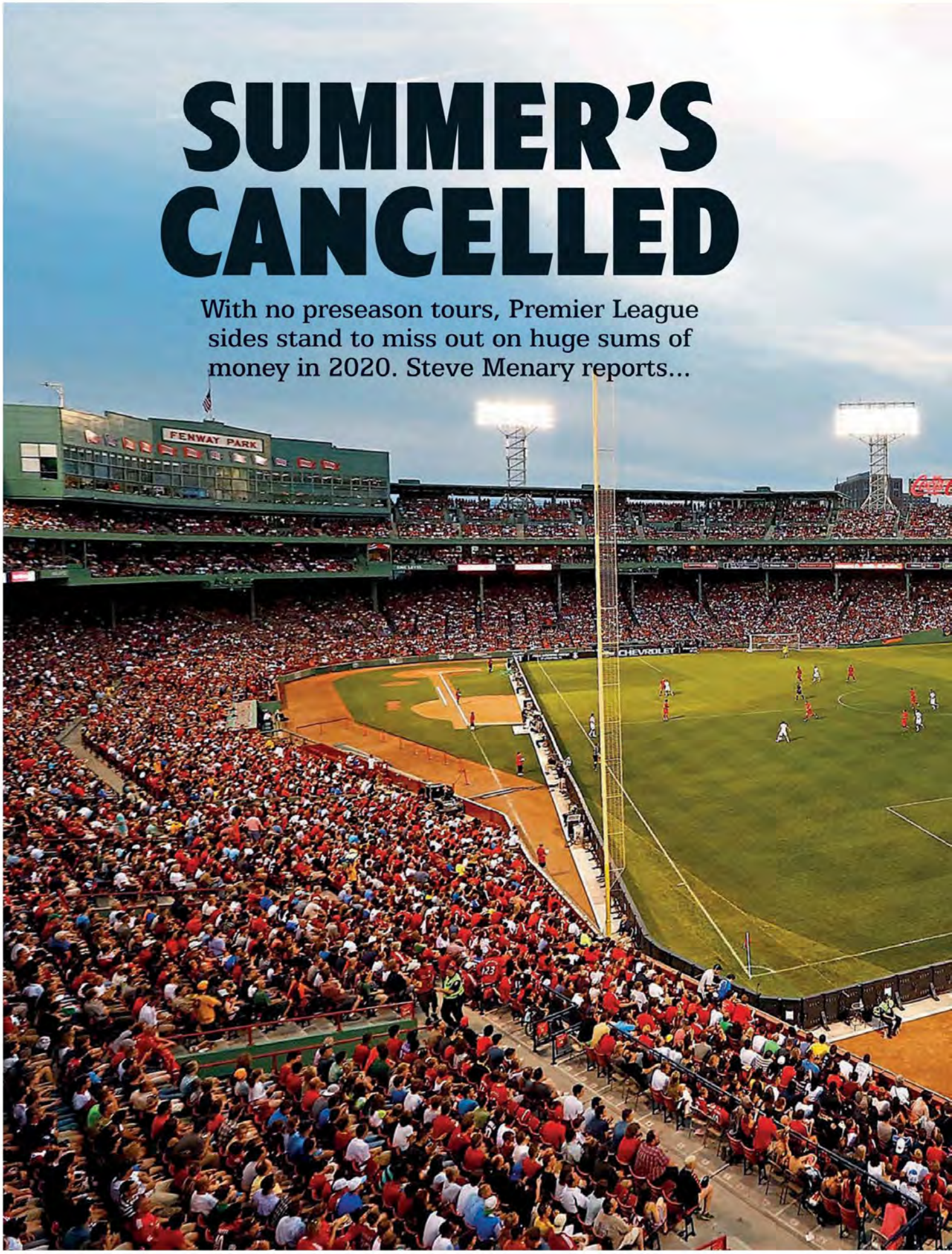
They are not short of emerging talent. Elusive Israeli winger Manor Solomon is growing in poise and influence week on week, Ukraine U21 international Vladyslav Vakula is a highly-promising forward, although he will miss the first few months of the new campaign after a shoulder operation. Barring any major injuries to this highly-talented squad, it is likely to be another title for Shakhtar.

All Ukrainian lovers of sporting romance will be keeping their fingers crossed that a few more chapters remain in the Cinderella story of village team Kolos Kovalivka, who in five short years have gone from the domestic amateur ranks to the upper echelons of the Premier League. Only a football entity since 2012, Kolos enjoyed a memorable elite inauguration last term, finishing sixth in the table and winning a play-off to earn Europa League qualification – their first-ever appearance in cross-border competition. Incredible progress, especially when you consider that they come from a hamlet of only 1,500 inhabitants.

Nick Bidwell

SUMMER'S CANCELLED

With no preseason tours, Premier League sides stand to miss out on huge sums of money in 2020. Steve Menary reports...



For the commercial departments of the world's biggest clubs, preseason is almost more important than the actual season. The summer is a commercial free-for-all as clubs rack up thousands of air miles in pursuit of new fans, new sponsorship deals and better TV deals – but not this year.

Coronavirus left leagues struggling to finish and, along with travel restrictions, there is no space for the traditional preseason. Most managers will be relieved that there will be no need for the annual battles with commercial departments over long trips that drain players on the eve of the season.

No other clubs travel like those from the Premier League: in the last decade, 40 different countries have hosted teams from England's top division Between 2013 and 2017, 53 per cent of preseason games played by Premier League clubs were abroad. In the global battle for fans and television money, their biggest rival is La Liga, but only 43 per cent of preseason games played by top-flight Spanish clubs were overseas. The ratio is lower still in Italy, where 32 per cent of Serie A games are abroad, with 31 per cent for the Bundesliga and 30 per cent for France's Ligue 1.

Last summer, the Premier League clubs visited 19 countries, and the USA is the top destination. Football finance expert Kieran Maguire says: "US tours

Fenway Park...the iconic Boston Red Sox ground has regularly hosted Liverpool's preseason friendlies

Shanghai...fans at the ICC clash between Tottenham and Manchester United

Michigan...supporters at Manchester United v Liverpool in 2018

are very lucrative as clubs can charge a seven-figure fee. If 80,000 people pay $50, with catering and other income, you could probably gross $5 million. Divide that between the two clubs – that's $2m each and you keep the rest."

The International Champions Cup, run by Relevent Sports, the promoters controlled by Miami Dolphins owner Stephen Ross, is the biggest attraction. Global names from the Premier League and other major leagues play exhibition games in the USA and Asia.

With an average of nearly 15 substitutions per game, there is not much strain on the players, but fans don't seem to mind. When Barcelona played Real Madrid in Miami in 2017 in only the second *Clasico* held outside of Spain, tickets cost nearly nine times as much as that season's Champions League final, prompting a "Greed All About It" headline in UK newspaper *The Sun*.

With a $20m fee for the biggest names, most clubs won't care. However, this year's ICC has been cancelled.

Asia has also been a long-standing target for the Premier League but with a different strategy. Teams from North America are the second most popular opposition for Premier League clubs – behind Germany – but there is less interest in playing Asian clubs.

The Premier League Asia Trophy has been staged every two years since 2003 but after the 2015 event in Singapore, the tournament was restricted to Premier League clubs only. Over the past decade, English sides played 68 preseason games in nine Asian countries, but only 45 were against local sides.

Premier League clubs have played 24 games in China since 2010 but only seven against Chinese teams. Since 2013, the only matches played by a Premier League club against a Chinese side were by Southampton, who are owned by Chinese businessman Gao Jisheng. Poor pitches are one reason – in 2016, Beijing was due to host the first Manchester derby on foreign soil until it was cancelled due to the state of the playing surface. Another is that matches in China against other high-profile European sides, usually from Europe, can command higher TV rights.

Japan...Chelsea and Kawasaki Frontale players pose together

This summer was set to be particularly important for the Premier League's "big six." As they do the most touring, they used this to argue for a greater share of international TV rights in 2018, and were expected to continue attracting big crowds from across the globe.

On average, 75 per cent of all preseason friendlies over the last decade played by Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur have been overseas.

In that time, Man. City managed just four games in the UK. Even when these big clubs do play in the UK, opponents are often brought in from overseas to drive up gate receipts and commercial income. On average, over the last decade just 15 per cent of preseason games by the "Big Six" were against other UK clubs, while 35 per cent were played overseas in neutral venues. Some are matches in training camps, but many are exhibition games like the ICC.

This touring drives up overseas TV rights, which – unlike domestic Premier League rights – is rising and totalled £4.35 billion for 2019-22. The league is marketing rights for a new deal from 2022 and tours are an ideal marketing

Asia Trophy...Wolves beat Manchester City in last year's competition

opportunity, but not this summer.

Sales of new shirts, which are traditionally unveiled on the final game of the previous season then sold over the summer break, are also likely to suffer as the promotion schedule is disrupted. Last year, clubs in the big five European leagues sold a record 16 million shirts according to research by PR Marketing, whose director Dr. Peter Rohlmann says: "The record numbers for shirt sales in the top European leagues will decrease significantly due to the coronavirus circumstances and late presented new jerseys, but also due to the fact that significant sales promotion through preseason tours cannot take place.

"Overall, football merchandising will see significant losses in 2019-20 and 2020-21."

These problems have been partly mitigated by increasing take-up of digital platforms to connect with fans.

Simon Chadwick, professor of Eurasian Sport at the Emlyon Business School, says: "Ten years ago it would have really adversely affected engagement activities but with social media and broadcast media, what the pandemic has done is brought forward something that's happening anyway and hastened the rise of digital engagement."

This summer Bayern Munich created an online tour including digital autograph sessions and virtual fan challenges for the Bundesliga giants' 4,500 organised international fan clubs. This could be only the tip of the iceberg, with the potential for technology to radically change preseason forever.

"We are only just starting to see what can be achieved with augmented reality," adds Kieran Maguire. "Soon you will be able to watch a game in New York from the perspective of the national stadium in Malaysia, or there will be a camera embedded in Lionel Messi's shirt and you will be able to be Messi for that preseason friendly."

As with so many parts of the global economy, the latest Premier League summer break is likely to be very different from the last pre-COVID preseason of 2019.

> The league is marketing rights for a new deal from 2022 and tours are an ideal marketing opportunity, but not this summer

Premier League preseason destinations 2010-19

Country	Matches
USA	159
Germany	101
Austria	70
Portugal	31
Republic of Ireland	26
China	24
Hong Kong	24
Australia	22
Spain	20
France	19
Netherlands	19
Switzerland	17
Sweden	14
Singapore	12
Malaysia	9
Canada	8
Japan	7
Norway	7
South Africa	7
Thailand	7
Italy	5
Denmark	4
Finland	4
Indonesia	4
New Zealand	4
Belgium	3
Costa Rica	3
Turkey	3
Iceland	2
South Korea	2
Vietnam	2
Greece	1
Hungary	1
Kenya	1
Macau	1
Mexico	1
Poland	1
San Marino	1
Slovenia	1
Tanzania	1

Steve Menary is the author of the book "A Friendly Business? A critical evaluation of the globalisation of the commercialisation of the preseason friendly" (CIES 2019).

ARJEN ROBBEN

"I don't think I would have made a comeback for any other club"

Just over a year after playing his final game for Bayern Munich, Arjen Robben is back at boyhood club Groningen. The 36-year-old ended his career in 2019, but when he felt an urge to return, there was only one team he wanted to join. Mark Gleeson spoke to the Dutch winger about his comeback…

How did you get to this point where you are about to play again?

When I retired just over a year ago, I wrote in a small, open letter that the decision was the most difficult of my whole career. It was also a little forced, although at the time I didn't really go into that. But physical problems were at the heart of the decision, so it was kind of forced on me.

We then decided, OK, the career is over, but we'll stay another year in Munich to enjoy the city and get used to the idea of no longer being a footballer. I had a good time with the family, doing things like skiing. But eventually, the sports lover in me was searching for something to keep busy. I had contact with Erben Wennemars (former world record speed skater), who came up with a whole load of physical challenges for us to do together. We were in full training to do the Rotterdam Marathon, but unfortunately the coronavirus threw that flame in the water and the marathon was postponed. I was feeling good physically because I'd been training hard.

I've always kept in contact with Groningen from when I left at the age of 18. I've seen the ambition they have, their vision for the future. It appealed to me. And so, during the crisis, I started to think about things. We as a family were heading back to Groningen, and what could I do for the club? I didn't have any burning ambition to become a coach and given I was feeling really good and physically fit – the aches and pains had disappeared – I realised where I'd be of best value was still on the field. A week after the club management came to see me in Munich in May, I decided to give it a go. I started football specific training almost immediately.

I have a really good feeling for the future and for me the most important thing can be described in a few words – "love of the club". I don't think I would have made a comeback for any other club. This was the only option for me, and I hope I will get a lot of pleasure out of it.

Your return created a real buzz about the club – Groningen sold 1,600 extra season tickets in the space of 30 minutes after the announcement. What did you make of that?

I was aware of some of the reaction. It was double delight for us as a family, because the excitement came just as we arrived after driving up from Munich to begin our new lives, having spent 11 years in Germany and 18 away from Groningen. We got a great family welcome-home party and then after checking my phone, the reaction was very nice to see. The positive reaction has given me a great feeling.

So, the coronavirus crisis played a major role in this decision. Can you explain this a little more?

Yes, it certainly played a part! You realise how terrible and how tedious something like this is, but then ironically there were one or two positives. I don't know if I'd have taken the comeback decision if I hadn't been cooped ➤

OFFICE
CENTRE

Comeback...Robben played 52 games in his first spell at Groningen before leaving in 2002

up at home. Maybe I would have. I had the time to think to myself: "You are going home to Groningen, what could you do for the club, what would you find appealing for yourself?" Then it was very clear to make a return to the pitch.

You are going from playing with the likes of Robert Lewandowski to working with Groningen players. How will you handle the change in quality?

We have to be honest and admit there is a difference in quality between Bayern Munich and Groningen, but I see that as a positive challenge. What is important is that I'm doing this because I think I will enjoy it but also to help the club. There is one way for me to be able to do that and that is by example. I hope I can influence the youngsters, but I'm not one who is going to be talking to them all the time.

Winner...Arjen won 20 trophies at Bayern, scoring the winner in the 2013 Champions League Final

Send-off...Robben scored in his final Bundesliga match for Bayern in May 2019

It is by your own actions, both on the field and in the changing room, that you can help. It's really about proving your worth on the field where you can be a good example to the rest of the squad.

How long do you think you can carry on with the comeback – maybe two or three seasons?
No, I don't want to look too far ahead. I see this not only as a comeback but also an effort to play again. We will have to see how physically challenging it proves to be. That you will only know by playing.

My objective is to be back on the pitch and play in the games, but I think it is also important – to avoid disappointment from everyone – to point out it could vary from zero games, or one or two, to... well I won't say 34 games because I've never managed that in my career! But I hope a whole lot and that's what I'm aiming for. I feel very positive about it and I'm going to give it the best I can. But how it turns out, no one can predict.

Will you be cycling to training, as you did when you were 18?
Probably, yes! We built a house that is a good cycling distance from the training ground.

> "This is where I come from, it's home. It's where I grew up"

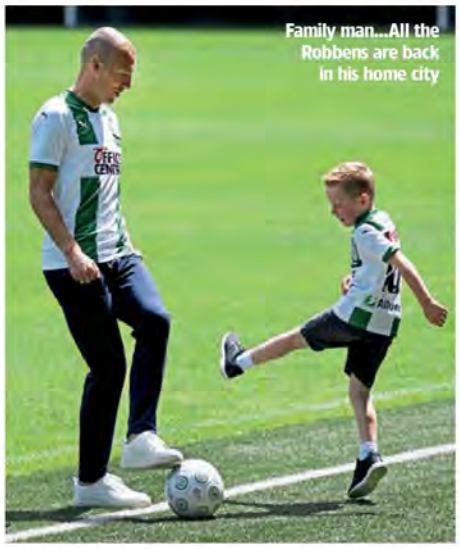
How much did you miss football?
To be honest, I didn't miss it at all for the first six months. I enjoyed a lot of other things. I'm a sports fan who enjoys other sport too. I still think that if I had got a really nice offer from a big club, or if Bayern Munich had said: "Hey, come back" I would not have done it. So, this is the combination of not only wanting to play again but to also help Groningen. I don't think I would have done it otherwise.

What about football did you miss?
The matches, the full stadiums. Also working towards an objective, like trying to qualify for major tournaments with the Dutch national team or big championship matches with your club. That's what motivates me and that's what I'll be looking for with Groningen, especially when the public are allowed back. We'll have to see how that all develops but that is what I'm looking forward to.

You started out at Groningen aged 16, but then left at 18 to join PSV. Can you explain a little bit more about your affection for the club?
This is where I come from, it's home. It's where I grew up. I came through the youth structures, four and a half years before my debut. I was ready for the opportunity and I did leave fairly fast. But for me, I've come home, and FC Groningen are a part of that.

Your wife played a big role in help initiating your comeback, what was your reaction to that?
Obviously if you step away from the game after 20 years and then a year later you want to go back, it is something you have to talk through thoroughly first with your family. I was surprised how positive she was about it, she really likes the idea of a comeback at Groningen and supports it. We have been together since I was 18, so we've had an enormous adventure together. It makes it easier that after all these years of travelling to Eindhoven, London, Madrid and Munich, we have returned home.

Interview by Mark Gleeson



Family man...All the Robbens are back in his home city

Glenn Moore

New season in Europe

USA internationals and World Cup winners Sam Mewis and Rose Lavelle are among the many eye-catching transfers ahead of the 2020-21 campaign

World Cup winner... Lavelle celebrates scoring against Thailand at the 2019 finals

These are strange times, but the transfers of Rose Lavelle and Sam Mewis to Manchester City still made major waves. USA internationals have moved from America's NWSL to England's WSL before, but they have usually either been winding down their careers (Carli Lloyd at Manchester City, Heather O'Reilly at Arsenal), or still developing it (Crystal Dunn at Chelsea). Lavelle, 25, is a star, arguably the best player at the 2019 World Cup. At 27, Mewis is in her prime, a starter in that victorious USA side and a winner of three of the last four NWSL championships.

The pair's switch may have been prompted by the abbreviated NWSL season, but they will not be back until after next summer's Olympics at the earliest and the choice of destination is significant. The WSL is fast emerging as the main rival to the NWSL, with Chelsea previously luring Australia icon Sam Kerr across the Atlantic from Chicago Red Stars. "The WSL is a great league that keeps getting better every year," said Lavelle. "It is attracting a lot of really great players."

Part of the draw is the chance to play at venues such as Wembley. In August, Man. City took on Chelsea in the first women's Community Shield since the WSL began, as part of a double-header with the men's version, Liverpool v Arsenal – another first.

The deal proved that City, now under former men's player Gareth Taylor, intend to wrest the title back from Chelsea. They have also signed England's Chloe Kelly from Everton, and brought England full-backs Lucy Bronze (ex-City) and Alex Greenwood (ex-United) back to Manchester from Lyon.

> "The WSL is a great league that keeps getting better every year. It is attracting a lot of really great players"
>
> Rose Lavelle

Chelsea have strengthened in midfield with Melanie Leupolz and Jessie Fleming, Germany and Canada internationals respectively. Arsenal, the other member of WSL's "Big Three", have added Australia's Lydia Williams and Steph Catley, and Switzerland duo Noelle Maritz and Malin Gut. Among the more notable moves elsewhere, Everton have invested significantly to bring in Valerie Gauvin from Montpellier, England's Lucy Staniforth has joined Manchester United from Birmingham City, and Danielle Carter seeks to revive her injury-hit career at Reading after 11 years at Arsenal.

Another English striker on the move is Jodie Taylor, who joined Lyon on loan from partner club OL Reign. She won her first medal after five minutes, coming on as a late substitute in the delayed French Cup final victory over Paris Saint-Germain. This was settled, like several games between the teams – including the 2017 Champions League final – by penalties. As in 2017, PSG's goalkeeper missed the crucial kick, this time Christiane Endler.

While Lyon and PSG will again duel the French title and Wolfsburg look set to maintain supremacy in Germany despite Eintracht Frankfurt's merger with FFC Frankfurt, honours in Spain and Italy appear less clear-cut. Real Madrid's move into the women's game is complete, having now assumed CD Tacon's name, and they will be expected to challenge Barcelona and Atletico Madrid.

Similarly Milan, in their third season since buying the licence of Brescia, will hope to press triple champions Juventus much closer after successive third-place finishes. Much-travelled goalscorer Natasha Dowie is the marquee signing with France's Laura Agard, Germany's Julia Simic and Denmark's Caroline Rask also joining.

ACF Fiorentina, who launched the new era in Italian women's football when they became the first Serie A club to field a female team in 2015, but have since been eclipsed by Juventus, have also invested. Claudia Neto (Wolfsburg), Louise Quinn (Arsenal) and Tessel Middag (West Ham) are their notable foreign signings. Napoli are back in the top flight after winning Serie B but the team is not formally associated with the men's club.

With no Italian clubs in the last eight of the Champions League, Calcio Femminile Serie A began on August 23, a fortnight earlier than the other major winter leagues.

New WSL arrival... Mewis has been a regular for North Carolina Courage

NWSL Challenge Cup

Houston Dash claim victory in a successful tournament both on and off the pitch

Champions...Dash striker Daly lifts the trophy

With the coronavirus laying waste to the football calendar, the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) hurriedly put together a tournament – the NWSL Challenge Cup. After an uncertain start, with Orlando Pride being forced to withdraw on the competition's eve after a slew of positive tests, it was an unqualified success.

The short format also threw up a surprise, with Houston Dash, a hitherto unremarkable expansion franchise, emerging as victors while favourites North Carolina Courage failed to make the last four.

While the Dash were understandably jubilant, the real winners were the NWSL front office for successfully pulling off the challenge of making women's soccer the first sport back in the US. They were rewarded with excellent TV ratings at home (the final drew 653,000 on CBS) and a spark of interest in England prompted by Lioness Rachel Daly, the Dash captain, winning MVP and the Golden Boot.

The tournament was staged in Utah with all players ensconced in a quarantined "bubble" in housing provided by Dell Loy Hansen, owner of Utah Royals. Regular COVID-19 tests were conducted with zero positives.

Several players opted out, including US internationals Megan Rapinoe, Tobin Heath and Christen Press; others were injured or had playing time limited by the national team. However, in the circumstances it was a solid effort and if there was some stardust absent at times qualities such as resilience and unity came to the fore.

Courage were the best team by a distance in the initial group stage, winning all four matches to finish five points clear of the pack. Second favourites Portland Thorns were unexpectedly last, with three draws and a loss. This pitted them together in the seeded quarter-finals and Thorns subsequently produced the first upset, back-up goalkeeper Britt Eckerstrom denying Courage with a string of saves either side of rookie Morgan Weaver's debut goal. That proved the only goal of the quarter-finals with the other ties all going to penalties.

Having put out the hosts in the shoot-out, the Dash beat Thorns in the semi-finals with an opportunist goal by Daly, the competition's first for six hours. With the drought broken, Chicago Red Stars then edged a five-goal thriller in the other semi, holding off a resurgent Sky Blue.

Red Stars, championship play-off finalists in 2019, were favoured but the Dash had grown to relish their underdog role. Sophie Schmidt's early penalty gave them something to defend which they did valiantly before Shea Groom's injury-time breakaway sealed victory. "It's just been a special journey," said Groom. "We took it one step at a time, one game at a time, one minute at a time."

Head coach James Clarkson added: "We've got to go on and prove that we can do these kinds of things on a week-to-week basis when the league gets back up and running. It's just going to get harder for us. It's exciting. We're at the start of something."

Transfer round-up

A look at some of the other major transfers in the women's game:

- **Ivana Andres (SPA)**
  Levante to Real Madrid
- **Chloe Arthur (SCO)**
  Birmingham City to Aston Villa
- **Viviane Asseyi (FRA)**
  Bordeaux to Bayern Munich
- **Ramona Bachmann (SUI)**
  Chelsea to Paris Saint-Germain
- **Ona Batlle (SPA)**
  Levante to Manchester United
- **Sara Bjork Gunnarsdottir (ICE)**
  Wolfsburg to Lyon
- **Klara Buhl (GER)**
  Freiburg to Bayern Munich
- **Ellie Carpenter (AUS)**
  Portland Thorns to Lyon
- **Niamh Charles (ENG)**
  Liverpool to Chelsea
- **Marta Corredera (SPA)**
  Levante to Real Madrid
- **Jess Fishlock (WAL)**
  OL Reign to Reading (Loan)
- **Alia Guagni (ITA)**
  ACF Fiorentina to Atletico Madrid
- **Kathrin Hendrich (GER)**
  Bayern Munich to Wolfsburg
- **Katarzyna Kiedrzynek (POL)**
  Paris Saint-Germain to Wolfsburg
- **Virginia Kirchberger (AUT)**
  Freiburg to Eintracht Frankfurt
- **Elena Linari (ITA)**
  Atletico Madrid to Bordeaux
- **Caroline Moller Hansen (DEN)**
  Fortuna Hjorring to Inter
- **Jade Moore (ENG)**
  Orlando Pride to Atletico Madrid (Loan)
- **Erin Nayler (NZL)**
  Bordeaux to Reading
- **Lena Oberdorf (GER)**
  Essen to Wolfsburg
- **Osinachi Ohale (NIG)**
  Real Madrid to Roma
- **Eve Perisset (FRA)**
  Paris Saint-Germain to Bordeaux
- **Daniela Sabatino (ITA)**
  Sassuolo to ACF Fiorentina
- **Diana Silva (POR)**
  Sporting to Aston Villa
- **Merel van Dongen (NED)**
  Real Betis to Atletico Madrid

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Copa Libertadores...set to return on September 15

BAYERN EDGE OUT PSG

Yet stain of sportswashing hangs over showpiece final

So the club that includes the state-owned airline of a human-rights-abusing emirate as a sponsor beat the club owned by that emirate. Football breathed a sigh of relief: the sacred cup had held back the fullest tide of sportswashing for one more season. Yet Bayern Munich's winner was scored by a player who was convicted of assaulting the mother of his child in 2017. The European game's finale was an unedifying spectacle all-round.

Let nobody be under any illusion what the 2020 Champions League final represented, or why Qatar Airways was so keen to promote it as the "*Qlassico*". This was the result of a meeting held a decade ago at the Elysee Palace in Paris between the French president Nicolas Sarkozy, Crown Prince Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani of Qatar, Michel Platini and the owners of Paris Saint-Germain. Ten days later, Platini voted for Qatar to host the 2022 World Cup. Within a year, Paris Saint-Germain, who had been struggling financially, were bought by Qatari Sports Investments, an arm of the emirate's sovereign wealth fund and soon the French league was buoyed by a broadcast rights deal with the Qatar-based *beIN Sports*.

Save...Mbappe had PSG's best chance

Forget the *kafala* system of visa sponsorship, forget the appalling conditions in which migrant workers labour, forget the restrictions on women, forget the fact that homosexuality is still illegal; look at the sparkly football.

For most of the past decade, PSG's football has been a vaguely comic morality tale. Domestic silverware has stacked up yet brought increasingly little satisfaction. There had never been a domestic treble in France until six years ago; since then there have been four. What was needed was a Champions League to finally set the seal on the project. But it's hard to compete with Europe's other super-clubs when you are never seriously challenged at home.

Under Thomas Tuchel, PSG have improved significantly. A final represents their best Champions League performance, but in the end, they were undone by a Bayern side that had greater depth and pressed better. Thomas Muller, notably, regained possession more than the PSG front three put together, for all that Neymar has been more disciplined with regard to his defensive responsibilities than ever before.

It may have been a measure enforced by necessity, but the final fortnight – even without fans – was a success. There was the same sense of momentum, of a

Champions... Bayern join Liverpool on six titles

celebration of the game, of narratives clashing and intertwining that you get at a World Cup or continental tournament. It's unlikely to replace the traditional two-legged format long-term, but there was plenty here to encourage, for instance, those promoting the expanded Club World Cup: the club game too can work in a tournament format.

Perhaps the semi-finals were anti-climactic, but the drama of the quarters – Barcelona's chickens coming home to roost in spectacular fashion; another mystifying tactical decision from

Not this time...Neymar won the trophy in 2015

Winner...Coman heads past Navas

Pep Guardiola; PSG's late escape against Atalanta; Joao Felix's intervention from the bench and then Julian Nagelsmann's negation of him – more than made up for it.

In Bayern, the tournament had the right winner, in the sense that they have played the best football, certainly since Hansi Flick took over in November. Their winner was a distillation of their style: a rapid exchange of passes, rounded off by Joshua Kimmich's deft cross and Kingsley Coman's back-post header.

No other side has claimed the Champions League by winning every game and, while the absence of second legs in the quarter and semi-finals meant that was a slightly easier task than usual, it is still a remarkable achievement. The 8-2 evisceration of Barcelona was a game that will resonate long after the specifics are forgotten. They are the image of the intelligent muscularity that has come to dominate at the highest level of the game.

> The European game's finale was an unedifying spectacle all-round

Still, as deserved as their victory was, the grim context of the final cannot be ignored.

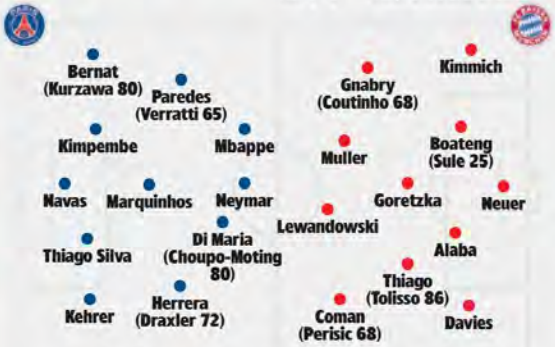
Jonathan Wilson

2020 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL

August 23 – Lisbon, Estadio Da Luz

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN	**0**
BAYERN MUNICH (Kingsley Coman 59)	**1**

HT: 0-0 ***Ref: Daniele Orsato***



WHAT THEY SAID

HANSI FLICK
(Bayern Munich coach)
"I am proud of the team. When I saw the headlines in November [when he took over], all I read was that nobody is afraid of Bayern anymore. The development since then has been crazy. We deserved to win, because of the second half.

"You could already see in training at our winter camp in January that something big was growing. The team is eager and we have players with boundless desire to win. The team is always in the foreground. When you see how we worked until the 96th minute tonight in defence then it is a superb team spirit.

"Every player developed this season in such a way so as to win three titles. This only happens as a team. The only thing that was missing was the fans. Maybe in the future we can have games with fans again. This sport deserves it."

THOMAS TUCHEL
(Paris Saint-Germain coach)
"This is only the start and we haven't reached the top of the mountain yet – that's the most important thing, as opposed to my contract. We can talk about all that once we have built the team and once everyone is on the same page as to the sort of game you want to play.

"Over the last two years we have really built a special atmosphere in the camp and without that mood in the camp, without that respect with the players and the atmosphere with both the staff and the players, without all of that day in, day out, naturally you can't win four pieces of silverware and make it into the Champions League final.

"We really need to keep that spirit to maintain that mentality, it is absolutely crucial to do that so that we can continue to forge a strong squad. You need a lot of big characters, big players and that is why we need to once again build another strong powerful side that can really kick on and continue this run.

"It is never easy. It takes a lot of effort and that will be the challenge to try to re-discover this spirit and try to kick on from this. That is really our challenge going forward."

KINGSLEY COMAN
(Bayern Munich – Man of the Match)
"It's extraordinary, it's a great happiness. I feel a little sadness for Paris, they've had an extraordinary journey and we must respect what Paris have done. We tried to keep them under pressure and they played on the counter-attack mostly. We didn't concede a goal and that was the most important thing. Paris had a great game, but so did we. It was a great final."

LET'S TALK ABOUT SIX

Sevilla win a record sixth Europa League crown

Penalty...Lukaku is tripped by Diego Carlos

The Europa League has never benefited from such a high profile. In the sadly but strangely beneficial circumstances of 2019-20, Sevilla, now record six-times champions, were appropriate as well as worthy winners after a 14-month season.

In the past, the Europa League's closing stages have been overshadowed by the Champions League.

This time it was different. The ravages of COVID-19 persuaded UEFA to find a one-off remedy that could not have worked more effectively. With no domestic football to compete, the Europa League's final eight mini-tournament in Germany benefited from a broadcasting bonanza by running alternately with the Champions League in Portugal. Top-level European club competition was out there every night.

Once the round of 16 second legs had been sorted out, it was to Germany for the "Final Eight" – not in one city, as in the Champions League, but four: Cologne, Duisburg, Dusseldorf and Gelsenkirchen.

The concept and venues worked. All that remained was for the football to rise to the closed-doors challenge.

Happily, it did. All credit to coaches and players, who came out victorious over coronavirus and complexity.

Not all the games were memorable. Fatigue, fitness levels and the peculiar pressures of the extended season took their toll as early as the quarter-finals.

Shakhtar of Ukraine saw off Basle easily 4-1, but Manchester United needed extra time to edge out FC Copenhagen. United hit the post four times and had one goal and one penalty appeal rejected by the video assistant before Bruno Fernandes scored the decisive goal with a typically unerring spot-kick in the 95th minute.

Single-goal margins also saw the two eventual finalists through: Inter by 2-1 against Bayer Leverkusen and Sevilla by 1-0 against Wolverhampton Wanderers, with a late goal from Argentinian Lucas Ocampos punishing an early penalty miss by Wolves' Mexico striker Raul Jimenez. In the semi-finals, Sevilla recovered from conceding another early Fernandes penalty to beat wasteful United 2-1, while Inter ran down Shakhtar 5-0, with two-goal Romelu Lukaku extending his run of scoring in successive matches in the competition to ten.

But Inter's first appearance in a European final since winning the Champions League under Jose Mourinho in 2010 was not the success they and their Belgian top scorer had anticipated.

Record-breakers... Sevilla players celebrate with Lopetegui

They took an early lead over Sevilla, conceded two headed goals, struck back shortly before the interval then lost, most painfully, to a Lukaku own goal.

The *Nerazzurri*, despite having rested for one day fewer, had started as narrow favourites under Antonio Conte, whose passion earned him one of the game's six yellow cards in a feisty final.

The opening minutes saw Dutch referee Danny Makkelie wave away Sevilla claims that Danilo D'Ambrosio should have been sent off for baulking Ocampos. Inter capitalised immediately – Lukaku pulled down on the break by Diego Carlos before rising to his feet to convert the fifth-minute penalty and put them ahead.

Diego Carlos had been fortunate to escape a red card. Not that Inter cared as they celebrated Lukaku's 34th goal of the season, thus matching the tally of Brazilian superstar Ronaldo when Inter won this competition in 1997-98. It seemed that the omens were good for the Italian side.

But Sevilla's record of 20 games unbeaten since February was not in danger for long. In the 12th minute veteran wing-back Jesus Navas flighted a cross to the near post where Luuk de Jong dived in to head home.

The Dutchman had been a goalscoring substitute in Sevilla's semi-final defeat of Manchester United and fully justified coach Julen Lopetegui's decision to start him this time.

Play ebbed and flowed in both directions before Sevilla took the lead in the 33rd minute. De Jong was the scorer again with another header, this time converting a free kick from former Inter playmaker Ever Banega. Two more minutes and it was Inter's turn to equalise. Sevilla switched off at the back as veteran Uruguay centre-back Diego Godin headed home Marcelo Brozovic's free kick.

The match turned on a nine-minute spell midway through the second half. First, Lukaku broke clear only for Sevilla keeper Bono to block his shot. The significance of that save was enhanced in the 74th minute. Inter failed to clear a free kick, and Diego Carlos' bicycle kick was diverted into the net by Lukaku.

Conte quickly introduced Victor Moses, Alexis Sanchez and Christian Eriksen to try to rescue the game, and the attacking tactic appeared to pay off as Sanchez stabbed the ball goalwards, until centre-back Jules Kounde stretched out a long leg to hack off the line.

Winner...Diego Carlos sends the ball goalwards

Header...De Jong equalises for Sevilla

That clearance ensured Sevilla's record of not conceding a second-half goal in 13 games and duly delivered the Europa League trophy for a record sixth time. It also completed the rehabilitation of 53-year-old Lopetegui.

Two years ago the former national youth coach endured the humiliation of being sacked within five months, either side of the World Cup finals in Russia, first by Spain and then Real Madrid. Until this moment he had never won a major senior trophy as a coach.

> Conte's passion earned him one of the game's six yellow cards in a feisty final

Conte's Inter were second best on the night but consolation was that they, like Sevilla, will enter the Champions League in the new season. The Europa League will then, barring a second wave of COVID-19, resume its standard format and finale. The Europa League will slip back into the Champions League's long shadow.

Keir Radnedge

2020 EUROPA LEAGUE FINAL

August 21 – Cologne, RheinEnergieSTADION

SEVILLA 3
(Luuk De Jong 12, 33, Romelu Lukaku OG 74)

INTERNAZIONALE 2
(Romelu Lukaku 5 pen, Diego Godin 35)

HT: 0-0 ***Ref: Danny Makkelie***

WHAT THEY SAID

JULEN LOPETEGUI
(Sevilla coach)
"This is very special. For us, for me, for the fans, it is very special. We have a happy ending. Also, this victory is for Jose Antonio Reyes, Antonio Puerta and all of those who are no longer with us. We conceded three penalties in the last three matches in the first five minutes but our team never surrenders."

LUUK DE JONG
(Sevilla – Man of the Match)
"The coach told me I was starting only in the morning. I told him I am always ready when he needs me and it worked really well. To score two goals and win is incredible. We had such tough games all tournament but we played so well as a team. We are like a family, we worked together. It didn't matter who came in."

ANTONIO CONTE
(Inter coach)
"Of course, it's a big disappointment, to come to a big final and then to lose, even to a good opponent. What happens next for Inter, we will discuss sensibly. It's only right that we analyse the entire season, look at everything in a calm way, and try to plan the future of Inter, whether it's with or without me. I will always be grateful for having the chance to spend a great year at Inter, but on the other hand it was also very tough."

ROMELU LUKAKU
(Internazionale – goalscorer)
"What happened in the final upset me but I will fight back. I never had the easy way in life and this experience will make me stronger. One thing for sure is that this experience will also make us better as a team. There's unity and we're heading the right direction."

JULY 18-AUGUST 14, 2020

Global diary

Stories from the four corners of the football world

Saturday July 18

SPAIN: Tercera play-off clash between Canary Islands sides Marino and Tamaraceite sees fans return to stadiums in Spain for the first time since March.
ITALY: Zlatan Ibrahimovic hints at a longer stay in Milan: "It's a great honour to play 100 games for Milan. I hope to play lots more," said the 38-year-old.
ENGLAND: Arsenal beat Manchester City 2-0 in the FA Cup semi-final, with a brace from Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang.
USA: Diego Rossi scores four goals as Los Angeles FC thrash LA Galaxy 6-2 in *El Trafico*.

Sunday July 19

IRAQ: Iraq Football Association announces that the league will return on September 20, having previously abandoned the 2019-20 season.
GREECE: Thousands of Olympiakos supporters gather outside the Georgios Karaiskakis Stadium to celebrate the club's 45th league title.
TURKEY: Istanbul Basaksehir beat Kayserispor 1-0 to win the Turkish Super Lig title for the first time with a game to spare.
ENGLAND: Manchester United lose 3-1 to Chelsea in the second FA Cup semi-final at Wembley, with poor errors by goalkeeper David De Gea costing his team.
SPAIN: La Liga season concludes. Barcelona beat Alaves 5-0, with Leo Messi securing his seventh *Pichichi* Trophy – and fourth in a row – while Villarreal win 4-0 in Santi Cazorla's final game for the club. Relegated Leganes twice come from behind to draw 2-2 with champions Real Madrid.

Monday July 20

AFRICA: The Confederation of African Football confirms that the 2023 edition of the Africa Cup of Nations will be played in June and July in the Ivory Coast.
FRANCE: Magazine *L'Equipe* announces that the Ballon d'Or will not be awarded in 2020 due to the coronavirus fallout.
ITALY: Cristiano Ronaldo scores his 50th Serie A goal, becoming the first player to reach a half century in England, Spain and Italy, and the quickest player to reach the milestone in Italian football.

Tuesday July 21

SPAIN: Lucas Ocampos is voted La Liga's best signing by *Marca*, ahead of Ferland Mendy, Diego Carlos, Jules Kounde and Frenkie de Jong. Meanwhile, Joao Felix, Antoine Griezmann, Junior Firpo and Luka Jovic feature in the worst signings of the season.

Wednesday July 22

ENGLAND: The Championship season concludes with West Bromwich Albion securing automatic promotion. Fulham, Brentford, Cardiff City and Swansea City make up the play-offs teams, while Hull City, Charlton Athletic and Wigan Athletic (following a points deduction) are relegated. Meanwhile, Liverpool lift the Premier League trophy after a 5-3 victory over Chelsea.
USA: David Villa denies allegations of sexual harassment during his time at New York City FC in MLS: "These accusations are entirely false. I deny them. I will fully co-operate with the club."
ITALY: Brescia's relegation from Serie A is confirmed with a 3-1 defeat to Lecce, joining SPAL in demotion to Serie B.

Costly errors...David De Gea

Champions...Sydney FC

Thursday July 23

ENGLAND: Birmingham City announce that they are retiring the No.22 shirt following the departure of Jude Bellingham.
CZECH REPUBLIC: It's announced that no team will be relegated from the Czech Republic's top flight. The competition was left unfinished after players tested positive for coronavirus, with Slavia Prague already crowned champions.

Friday July 24

ENGLAND: Liverpool midfielder Jordan Henderson is named Football Writers' Player of the Year.
FRANCE: Paris Saint-Germain lift their fifth Coupe de France in six seasons with a 1-0 win over Saint-Etienne, having lost to Rennes on penalties in 2019.

Saturday July 25

AUSTRALIA: Sydney FC secure their fourth A-League title after second-placed Wellington Phoenix draw 1-1 with Adelaide United, giving Sydney an unassailable lead with four games of the regular season to play.
QATAR: Former Barcelona star and current Al Sadd coach Xavi tests positive for coronavirus.
IRAN: Persepolis seal their 13th league title, and become the first Iranian team ever to win the competition four times in a row.

Sunday July 26

ENGLAND: The Premier League season concludes with Chelsea and Manchester United securing Champions League football by finishing in the top four. Watford and Bournemouth join Norwich City in being relegated to the Championship. Leicester City striker Jamie Vardy secures the Golden Boot, the first of his career.
ITALY: Juventus wrap up the Serie A title, their ninth in a row, by beating Sampdoria 2-0.
SAUDI ARABIA: French striker Bafetimbi Gomis extends his contract at 2019 AFC Champions League winners Al Hilal for a further two years.

Monday July 27

SCOTLAND: Hearts' relegation from the Scottish Premiership is confirmed after an arbitration panel upheld the Scottish Football Professional League decision to settle the curtailed season on a points-per-game basis.
SPAIN: Juventus-bound midfielder Arthur refuses to join Barcelona's squad for the Champions ➤

Tahiti

STEVE MENARY

The next generation

Pacific island side in need of games to develop new era of talent

After two years without a game, Tahiti's performance at the 2019 Pacific Games was encouraging, collecting three wins from five matches, but the French-controlled territory has not played since.

Tahiti were gearing up for this summer's OFC Nations Cup in New Zealand until the coronavirus pandemic hit and the tournament was cancelled and put back to 2023. The start of the Oceania World Cup qualifiers has also been delayed and the domestic championship stopped in March despite no recorded cases.

Frustrated national team coach Samuel Garcia says: "Since June 2019, this selection brings together in each FIFA window to train. A programme has been established so that the selection is competitive."

A decade ago, Tahitian football was going through a golden period as a generation of players that had grown up together including Steevy Chong Hue, the Tehau brothers Lorenzo and Alvin, and their cousin Teaonui qualified for the 2009 Under-20 World Cup. That core of players helped Tahiti win the 2012 OFC Nations Cup, which brought an appearance at the 2013 Confederations Cup in Brazil. Many of that team had been developed by national coach Eddy Etaeta, but he left to live in France in 2015 and Tahitian football lost momentum.

Rising star...Toulouse midfielder Terai Bremond

> A new generation is now coming through, which qualified for the U20 World Cup again last year

Confederations Cup... Tahiti qualified for the competition in 2013

A new generation is now coming through, which qualified for the U20 World Cup again last year. All three games in Poland were lost but Tahiti were not embarrassed, and the tournament was good experience for players like midfielder Terai Bremond and striker Eddy Kaspard, who both play in France.

Kaspard is with National 2 side Trelissac, while Bremond left Polynesia to join the Toulouse academy in 2016 and signed a professional contract with the Ligue 1 side in February last year.

Coach Garcia is looking for more players from the European diaspora to bolster his selection. At Tahiti's training camp in March, Bremond was joined on the trip for Europe by striker Kader Lazreg and FCE Merignac Arlac defender Francois Hapipi.

Garcia adds: "We have players who are currently playing in France, we are following them so that they can join the national selection. Lazreg, Hapipi, Bremond, Kaspard and others will be followed and convened if they are successful with their clubs in Europe."

Lazreg, who spent last season at Lannion FC, has an Algerian father and a Tahitian mother. "It was my first visit to Tahiti, and I met my family there for the first time," explained Lazreg. "The game is less technique and more physical, but they play with an open mind."

Lazreg, who is in talks with Algerian second division side Mo Bejaia for 2020-21, hopes to return to Tahiti in November if selected. By then, Garcia hopes to have actually played some matches.

"We are currently working to receive two matches at Tahiti and are preparing an outside tour during the next FIFA windows," explains Garcia. "The location is not determined. We have budgeted and are working on this."

With the delayed cup qualifiers expected to be rescheduled for March or June 2021, Tahiti will need match practice as Garcia looks to develop a new golden generation.

➤ League clash with Napoli. Meanwhile, Segunda Liga side Almeria sack coach Mario Silva, despite qualifying for the play-offs. Jose Gomes comes in as his replacement, taking his third job in nine months.

Tuesday July 28

SPAIN: Real Madrid and Dominican Republic forward Mariano tests positive for coronavirus.
NORTH AMERICA: CONCACAF announces changes to its 2022 World Cup qualifiers. Mexico, USA, Costa Rica, Jamaica and Honduras receive byes to the final eight, with 30 other nations battling to qualify for the remaining three spots. Each side in the final octagonal group will play four matches next June, with the process completed in March 2022.

Wednesday July 29

ENGLAND: The FA confirms that England Women will not take part in next year's SheBelieves Cup due to "existing uncertainties around the future trend of the COVID-19 pandemic." The Lionesses have competed at every previous tournament since its inception in 2016, winning the trophy in 2019.

Thursday July 30

ENGLAND: Saudi Arabian-backed consortium pulls out of its bid to buy Newcastle United, following the Premier League's lengthy delay in approving the takeover.
SWITZERLAND: Swiss prosecutors launch legal proceedings against FIFA president Gianni Infantino in relation to an alleged secret meeting with Swiss attorney general Michael Lauber. Lauber had offered to resign after a court said he covered up the meeting and lied during a corruption investigation.
ASIA: The AFF Championship, scheduled for later this year, is rescheduled for 2021. Defending champions Vietnam are expected to host the majority of matches.

Friday July 31

FRANCE: PSG beat Lyon on penalties to win the French League Cup, thereby sealing another domestic treble.

Saturday, August 1

ENGLAND: Arsenal defeat London rivals Chelsea to win the FA Cup at an empty Wembley stadium. ➤

Copa Libertadores

TIM VICKERY

Copa in crisis

CONMEBOL have some decisions to make over South America's premier club competition

At the time, some thought it was premature when the Copa Libertadores suddenly shut down on March 12 – a day when games were still taking place in the Europa League. In hindsight, it is clear that CONMEBOL made the right decision. Coronavirus is proving especially destructive in the Americas. The original idea floated as a restart date – May 5 – proved to be absurdly optimistic, and it is even possible that the same might apply to the current plans to get going on September 15.

Late July brought plenty of bad news. Formula One cancelled all of its races in the Americas. Rio de Janeiro called off its New Year's Eve celebrations as Brazil's death toll climbed alarmingly. There were worrying spurts in Peru, Colombia and Chile. Indeed, Chile introduced a 14-day quarantine period for all visitors – a measure which, if kept in effect, will clearly make it impossible to go ahead with the Libertadores in its current form.

On the same day, the infectious disease specialist of the Argentine government advised River Plate against travelling to Sao Paulo for the match scheduled for September 17 – and had his view endorsed when the health authorities in the Brazilian metropolis confessed that the virus would probably not be under control by then.

There could well be some tension behind the scenes, with the clubs, desperate for revenue, lobbying for a restart while those responsible for public health urge caution. This might be an issue in Paraguay, which locked down early – games were already being played behind closed doors before the Libertadores suspension – and which, as of July 25, had suffered just 38 deaths. Health chiefs there could be forgiven for wanting to call off the home and away matches between local champions Olimpia and Santos, from the state of Sao Paulo, as well as the visit of Palmeiras, from the city.

Even if the mid-September restart date proves viable, there are still problems on the horizon. One is logistical. At the best of times it can be difficult to travel around South America. Distances are vast and connections are often inadequate. Throw in the hit taken by the airline industry and the cancellation of flights and some teams will face epic journeys making their way to and from away fixtures.

And there is also the headache of a calendar that is already strained to breaking point. With six months hacked out of the year, there is no way that a full 2020 Libertadores programme can be completed before 2021. As it stands the semi-finals are set for the first half of January. No date has yet been fixed for the final, but the idea is for a showpiece occasion in Rio's Maracana stadium later in the month. Quite apart from possible concerns about the virus, the intense summer heat would surely inhibit an afternoon kick-off, at a time perfect for hitting the European evening and boosting the TV audience. And with the Brazilian Championship set to go through to the end of February, the 2021 Libertadores is unlikely to kick off until April, more than two months later than usual. At some point something will have to give, and a competition will have to be shortened.

> With six months hacked out of the year, there is no way that a full 2020 Libertadores programme can be completed before 2021

Final host...Rio's Maracana stadium

Europe, of course, chose to take that hit early, simplifying the 2019-20 Champions League by shifting the closing stages to a neutral venue. South American could end up having to do something similar. The obvious complication is the difference in the stage of the competitions. Coronavirus struck when the Champions League was already down to the last handful of clubs. The Libertadores, in contrast, was brought to a halt after just two of the

Holders...Flamengo won both of their Copa Libertadores fixtures back in March

six weeks of group-stage matches. There is a lot of football still to be played, and all 32 teams are still in contention. Taking all of the remaining terms to a single venue would be a massive undertaking.

Should such a move be necessary, Uruguay would be the obvious candidate. As of July 25, the country had suffered just 34 coronavirus deaths, and the city of Montevideo – which 90 years ago staged the first World Cup – has no shortage of stadiums. The task would be simplified, of course, by the absence of supporters.

In normal circumstances such a scheme would be unthinkable. These, though, are exceptional times. The Uruguay option has been floated behind the scenes, and could come to the rescue should it not prove possible to restart the Copa Libertadores on September 15 as planned.

Montevideo...the city boasts over a dozen football stadiums, including the huge Estadio Centenario

Japan

MIKE PLASTOW

J.League campaign in doubt

Surprises at both ends of the table, but problems off the pitch could be just around the corner in Japan

When the J.League resumed on July 4, Kawasaki Frontale hit the ground running. Six straight wins in July saw them top the table with 19 points and a healthy goal difference of +14. Frontale, champions in 2017 and 2018, were always going to be challengers this season after losing their title to Yokohama F-Marinos last year. Their results so far include a 4-0 win at last year's runners-up, FC Tokyo, and a 5-1 thrashing of Yokohama FC. The toothless 0-0 draw at home to perennial strugglers Sagan Tosu in their February opener already seems a world away.

Defending champions F-Marinos are looking surprisingly brittle at the back and have also failed so far to rediscover the fluid passing movement that swept them to last year's title. The champions won two and lost three after the restart and have also picked up worrying injuries to last year's joint-top scorers, Marcos Junior and Teruhito Nakagawa. The summer transfer of wide midfielder Keita Endo to Union Berlin will not help their cause.

Kashima Antlers, third last year, have fared even worse with only one win in seven and they ended July joint-bottom. Conversely, unfancied Gamba Osaka, Nagoya Grampus and newly-promoted Kashiwa Reysol, where Kenyan striker Michael

Empty...the league returned to empty stadiums

No chants allowed...fans at the last game before the league was suspended in February

Olunga had scored 12 goals in his first 12 games, are drawing a lot of positive attention. If the coronavirus suspension hasn't exactly turned the league upside down, some teams have clearly coped better than others.

The J.League's top division kicked off as planned on the fourth weekend of February, but then did not play again for over four months before resuming in front of empty stadiums on July 4. The writing was already on the wall in late February, of course, but most people were still surprised on that first weekend when Vissel Kobe told their fans not to shout or chant but only to clap during the match. Today, limited numbers of fans have been allowed back in the stadiums – up to 5,000 or 50% of stadium capacity, whichever is smaller – and clapping is the only kind of applause allowed.

After that first weekend, the J.League led the way in postponing matches ahead of both other Japanese sports and also the cinema, theatre and other closures that followed. It was a step-by-step process. The first postponement was for three weekends only, but that was then extended several times before eventually becoming indefinite. Play finally resumed after the government lifted the state of emergency.

If the coronavirus suspension hasn't exactly turned the league upside down, some teams have clearly coped better than others

Aside from the games, there were also all the questions about money. By April, the J.League was also arranging to make special three-year loans to member clubs, worth up to 350 million yen in the case of first division teams, to help tide them over during the crisis. Simultaneously, the league was also entering negotiations with its own banks for committed credit lines worth well over 20 billion yen for what could be its first major loans since the league kicked off in 1993. In tandem, all prize money for 2020 has been halved, and a call has been put out for private and corporate donations to sustain the sports projects normally funded by the football pools. There is obviously concern about what failure to complete the full fixture list could yet mean for the league's lucrative broadcasting contract with DAZN.

The weekend of July 4 was, coincidentally, intended to be the league's last round of matches before the summer break for the ill-starred Tokyo Olympic Games. The first direct consequence of this was the players now faced an extremely tight schedule in the difficult heat and humidity of the Japanese summer. For Division 2, the new schedule effectively meant playing two games a week for the entire remainder of the season.

The league has made several changes to help everyone cope. As in most other leagues, teams are now allowed to use five subs in a game instead of three, and the league has decreed there will be no relegation this year, only promotion. The league season has been extended by two weeks to December 19, and the Emperor's Cup and League Cup formats have been revamped to greatly reduce the match load. Another consequence of the pandemic has been the decision not to introduce VAR this season after all because of the difficulty of securing enough referees.

Even so, the J.League is simultaneously allowing for the possibility this season will not be completed at all. No awards will be made this year in any division if 75% of the matches have not been played and any club has not played 50% of its games. The fragility of the situation was underscored on July 26 when Grampus' game at Sanfrecce Hiroshima was postponed after a Nagoya player and members of team staff tested positive for coronavirus.

Although Japan has contained the coronavirus so far without any of the massive spikes seen in the West, the ending of the state of emergency was followed by an immediate and sustained rebound in the number of confirmed cases. The decision to let a restricted number of fans into the stadiums from July 11 was already looking rather alarming at the time and those restrictions are currently being extended two weeks at a time, most recently to the end of August. For the J.League, this is still only the beginning of a long, hot summer.

➤ Aubameyang scores twice again to cancel out Christian Pulisic's opener and seal a 2-1 victory.
SOUTH KOREA: Supporters return to stadiums in the K-League, with ten per cent of stadiums opened up for three fixtures.
PORTUGAL: Porto beat arch-rivals Benfica 2-1 in the Portuguese Cup final to complete a domestic double.

Sunday, August 2

ITALY: Serie A season concludes, with Lecce relegated from Serie A after one season in the top flight.
SCOTLAND: Odsonne Edouard fires a hat-trick past Hamilton as Celtic begin their quest for an unprecedented tenth successive Premiership title. Title rivals Rangers also make a winning start, beating Aberdeen 1-0.
UAE: CAS dismisses United Arab Emirates' allegation that Qatar fielded an ineligible player at the 2019 Asian Cup.
TANZANIA: Simba complete the domestic treble by beating Namungo in the FA Cup final.

Tuesday, August 4

GERMANY: Football clubs in Germany's top two divisions agree to plans drawn up by the league, which could allow the partial return of supporters to stadiums from mid-September.
ENGLAND: Fulham are promoted back to the Premier League at the first time of asking after beating West London rivals Brentford 2-1 in the Championship play-off final, thanks to a brace by left-back Joe Bryan in extra time. Meanwhile, Wigan Athletic's relegation to League One is confirmed after failing in their appeal against a 12-point deduction for going into administration.

Wednesday, August 5

ENGLAND: Arsenal announce 55 redundancies of non-playing staff.
ITALY: The Europa League last 16 resumes, with Internazionale knocking out Getafe and joining Shakhtar Donetsk, Copenhagen and Manchester United in the quarter-finals of the tournament.

Thursday, August 6

ENGLAND: Wolverhampton Wanderers beat Olympiakos in the Europa League, while Basle, Sevilla and Bayer Leverkusen also qualify for the mini-tournament in Germany. ➤

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

AFC Champions League conundrum

Fixture congestion in the East threatens the conclusion of the 2020 Asian Champions League

West and East Asia tend to continue along their own separate football paths, coming together for international tournaments and not much besides. This is not surprising given that little connects them: the differences in climate, culture, language and, of course, geographical location are huge.

That division is clear to see in the AFC Champions League at the best of times. The 32 teams that enter the continental tournament are separated into two zones with the best of the west and the east only coming together for the final.

This year's edition has, inevitably, been devastated by the coronavirus and attitudes on how to finish it, or whether to finish it at all, are very different depending on which side of Asia you happen to be in.

The major problem with the 2020 Asian Champions League when compared with the European version is that the former had only just got started when it was suspended. Some teams had played just two games of the group stage, some just once; three of the four Chinese representatives had not featured at all. That leaves a lot of football still to be played.

The games were initially put back to June but there were further postponements. In July, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said that the group stage in the western half will take place in Qatar in September. In the east, it will be in Malaysia and probably Thailand in October. After two busy weeks in which to finish the groups, the knockout rounds – with each tie reduced to a single game – will be held and it will all finish in December.

Well, that is the plan at least. The AFC is understandably keen to finish its flagship club tournament but all are aware that it will be impossible if the virus bounces back. Even the best-case scenario turns impossible into difficult, and some clubs in the east are grumbling that the new schedule is going to be hard to complete.

For western teams – from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Iran – it is not a major issue. Leagues there are beginning to restart after suspension but there are just a handful of games in the season remaining. Adding the Champions League is not a huge deal.

It is not so easy, however, for the eastern leagues of South Korea, Japan and China. The 2020 Chinese Super League season only kicked off on July 25, five months after it was supposed to. The season has been shortened and the league split into two, with games being played in twin hub cities of Dalian and Suzhou. Japan restarted in early July with South Korea in action from May. It all means that the eastern clubs have plenty going on in October and November. Having three or four of them from each league heading overseas for the best part of a month to finish the Champions League group stage is going to be a headache.

And then there was the issue of 2022 World Cup qualifiers scheduled for October/November. These

> Attitudes on how to finish it, or whether to finish it at all, are very different depending on which side of Asia you happen to be in

Friday, August 7

BANGLADESH: 18 Bangladesh players test positive for coronavirus.
RUSSIA: Dejan Lovren makes his debut as Zenit beat Lokomotiv 2-1 in the Russian Super Cup.
ENGLAND: Raphael Varane costs Real Madrid any chance of a comeback against Manchester City, with the English side winning 2-1. Gareth Bale is left out of Real Madrid's squad, with Zinedine Zidane saying: "It is a private conversation, but I can only tell you that he preferred not to play."

Saturday, August 8

ITALY: Juventus appoint Andrea Pirlo as head coach after Maurizio Sarri is sacked following the shock Champions League defeat to Lyon.
SPAIN: Lionel Messi helps fire Barcelona to the last eight of the Champions League with a 3-1 victory over Napoli.
GERMANY: Bayern Munich thrash Chelsea 4-1 in the Champions League, winning 7-1 on aggregate.

Sunday, August 9

FRANCE: Lyon Women win the Coupe de France feminine after beating PSG on penalties, with England international Lucy Bronze scoring in the shoot-out.

Tuesday, August 11

UEFA: Kosovan club Drita forfeit their Champions League qualifier with Linfield after two of their players test positive for COVID-19. The Northern Irish side advance to the next round to play Legia Warsaw of Poland.
SPAIN: More La Liga players test positive for coronavirus, including Real Betis forward Loren and Atletico Madrid duo Angel Correa and Sime Vrsaljko.
USA: Portland Timbers win the MLS Is Back tournament, beating Orlando City 2-1 in the final. Assistant referee Kathryn Nesbitt becomes the first woman to work a Major League Soccer title game.

Match-winner...Al Hilal striker Bafetimbi Gomis celebrates after scoring in last year's final

games would have marked the end of the second round, which sees 12 teams head to the next stage where Asia's four automatic berths will be allocated.

Some nations, like Japan and Australia, are almost there already but others, such as China and, to a lesser extent, South Korea still have work to do. China are almost out of the running to win their group – lagging eight points behind Syria – but still hope to qualify as one of the best runners-up, if results improve. Usually, the Chinese Super League would take a long break, perhaps as long as a month, to allow the national team to prepare.

With Champions League, World Cup qualifiers and domestic leagues, something had to give. For some Chinese clubs to play six group games in the space of two October weeks, then continue with the domestic season while also trying to give the national team a chance to keep dreams of 2022 alive, was too big an ask.

In doubt...AFC Champions League

That is why, on August 12, the AFC postponed the World Cup qualifiers until 2021. It leaves 14 qualifiers as well as play-offs to be played, and there is sure to be a time when the decision to move the 2022 World Cup from June to November, controversial at the time, is welcomed for the extra breathing space.

It leaves an awful lot of football to be played in 2021 (think about Australia who have the Copa America, World Cup qualifiers and the Olympics), but it also means that there should be a winner in the 2020 Champions League.

Wednesday, August 12

SPAIN: Villarreal sign Valencia duo Dani Parejo on a free transfer and Francis Coquelin for €8 million, leading to Valencia fans protesting outside owner Peter Lim's house.
AFC: All Asian 2022 World Cup qualifiers are postponed until 2021, meaning there are now too few international dates to complete games in time for the tournament.
PORTUGAL: PSG come from a goal down to beat Atalanta 2-1 in the first Champions League quarter-final, with both goals coming in stoppage time.

Thursday, August 13

USA: FC Dallas defender Reggie Cannon speaks out after being booed for taking the knee: "Millions of other people support this cause...and we've got fans booing us in our own stadium. It's absolutely disgusting." Meanwhile, new MLS expansion club for 2023 St. Louis City SC unveils its official name, crest and colours.
PORTUGAL: RB Leipzig defeat Atletico Madrid in the Champions League quarter-finals thanks to an 88th-minute goal from USA midfielder Tyler Adams.
ENGLAND: The Premier League and FA confirm it will scrap the winter break and FA Cup replays for the 2020-21 season to help ease fixture congestion.

Friday, August 14

PORTUGAL: Barcelona are humiliated in the Champions League, losing 8-2 to Bayern Munich, with loanee Philippe Coutinho compounding Barca's embarrassment by scoring the final two goals.
SPAIN: La Liga rejects plans for a 24-team Segunda Division, while Deportivo La Coruna formally request that Fuenlabrada are relegated from the second tier, alleging that they violated COVID-19 protocols and are therefore due a points deduction.

UEFA Nations League

2020 September-November

2021 Sept or Oct

LEAGUE A

GROUP A1	GROUP A2	GROUP A3	GROUP A4
Netherlands	England	Portugal	Switzerland
Italy	Belgium	France	Spain
Bosnia-Herz.	Denmark	Sweden	Ukraine
Poland	Iceland	Croatia	Germany

WINNERS → **NATIONS LEAGUE FINAL**: Group A1 Winner, Group A2 Winner, Group A3 Winner, Group A4 Winner

RELEGATION / PROMOTION

LEAGUE B

GROUP B1	GROUP B2	GROUP B3	GROUP B4
Austria	Czech Republic	Russia	Wales
Norway	Scotland	Serbia	Finland
N. Ireland	Slovakia	Turkey	Rep. of Ireland
Romania	Israel	Hungary	Bulgaria

RELEGATION / PROMOTION

LEAGUE C

GROUP C1	GROUP C2	GROUP C3	GROUP C4
Montenegro	Georgia	Greece	Albania
Cyprus	North Macedonia	Kosovo	Belarus
Luxembourg	Estonia	Slovenia	Lithuania
Azerbaijan	Armenia	Moldova	Kazakhstan

PROMOTION

LEAGUE D

GROUP D1	GROUP D2
Faroe Islands	Gibraltar
Latvia	Liechtenstein
Andorra	San Marino
Malta	

Each team will play their group opponents home and away. In Leagues B, C and D, group winners will be promoted for the 2022-23 edition, and in A and B the bottom sides will be relegated. The four teams finishing bottom of their group in League C will play-off to determine which two will be relegated.

There are ten European qualifying groups for the 2022 World Cup. The ten group winners will qualify directly for Qatar, with the ten runners-up going into a play-off competition.

2022 World Cu

Draw to be made on Nov 29, 2020

GROUP A

GROUP B

GROUP C

GROUP D

GROUP E

explained

The second edition of the competition created to replace international friendlies, which was first won by Portugal in 2019 and deemed an unprecedented success, begins again in September. The format has changed a little since then, so here's everything you need to know...

2022 March

2022 Nov-Dec

The four group winners in League A will head to the finals, with one of the four nations selected to host. As in 2019, there will be semi-finals, a final and a third-place play-off.

The ten runners-up will be joined by the two best Nations League group winners who failed to finish in the top two of their World Cup qualifying group. To reach Qatar, teams must win a semi-final then a final.

Europe will have 13 representatives at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar – ten group winners and three play-off winners.

up Qualifiers

GROUP F

GROUP G

GROUP H

GROUP I

GROUP J

WORLD CUP PLAY-OFFS

Group A runner-up
Group B runner-up
Group C runner-up
Group D runner-up
Group E runner-up
Group F runner-up
Group G runner-up
Group H runner-up
Group I runner-up
Group J runner-up
Nations League group winner
Nations League group winner

RELEGATION PLAY-OFFS

C1 Bottom team
C2 Bottom team
C3 Bottom team
C4 Bottom team

EUROPE'S WORLD CUP DELEGATION

Play-off 1 winner

Play-off 2 winner

Play-off 3 winner

Group A winner

Group B winner

Group C winner

Group D winner

Group E winner

Group F winner

Group G winner

Group H winner

Group I winner

Group J winner

PREMIER LEAGUE FIXTURES 2020-21

SEPTEMBER 12
Burnley P-P Manchester United
Crystal Palace v Southampton
Fulham v Arsenal
Liverpool v Leeds United
Manchester City P-P Aston Villa
Tottenham Hotspur v Everton
West Brom v Leicester City
West Ham United v Newcastle United

SEPTEMBER 14
Brighton v Chelsea
Sheffield United v Wolves

SEPTEMBER 19
Arsenal v West Ham United
Aston Villa v Sheffield United
Chelsea v Liverpool
Everton v West Brom
Leeds United v Fulham
Leicester City v Burnley
Manchester United v Crystal Palace
Newcastle United v Brighton
Southampton v Tottenham Hotspur
Wolves v Manchester City

SEPTEMBER 26
Brighton v Manchester United
Burnley v Southampton
Crystal Palace v Everton
Fulham v Aston Villa
Liverpool v Arsenal
Manchester City v Leicester City
Sheffield United v Leeds United
Tottenham Hotspur v Newcastle United
West Brom v Chelsea
West Ham United v Wolves

OCTOBER 3
Arsenal v Sheffield United
Aston Villa v Liverpool
Chelsea v Crystal Palace
Everton v Brighton
Leeds United v Manchester City
Leicester City v West Ham United
Manchester United v Tottenham Hotspur
Newcastle United v Burnley
Southampton v West Brom
Wolves v Fulham

OCTOBER 17
Chelsea v Southampton
Crystal Palace v Brighton
Everton v Liverpool
Leeds United v Wolves
Leicester City v Aston Villa
Manchester City v Arsenal
Newcastle United v Manchester United
Sheffield United v Fulham
Tottenham Hotspur v West Ham United
West Brom v Burnley

OCTOBER 24
Arsenal v Leicester City
Aston Villa v Leeds United
Brighton v West Brom
Burnley v Tottenham Hotspur
Fulham v Crystal Palace
Liverpool v Sheffield United
Manchester United v Chelsea
Southampton v Everton
West Ham United v Manchester City
Wolves v Newcastle United

OCTOBER 31
Aston Villa v Southampton
Burnley v Chelsea
Fulham v West Brom
Leeds United v Leicester City
Liverpool v West Ham United
Manchester United v Arsenal
Newcastle United v Everton
Sheffield United v Manchester City
Tottenham Hotspur v Brighton
Wolves v Crystal Palace

NOVEMBER 7
Arsenal v Aston Villa
Brighton v Burnley
Chelsea v Sheffield United
Crystal Palace v Leeds United
Everton v Manchester United
Leicester City v Wolves
Manchester City v Liverpool
Southampton v Newcastle United
West Brom v Tottenham Hotspur
West Ham United v Fulham

NOVEMBER 21
Aston Villa v Brighton
Burnley v Crystal Palace
Fulham v Everton
Leeds United v Arsenal
Liverpool v Leicester City
Manchester United v West Brom
Newcastle United v Chelsea
Sheffield United v West Ham United
Tottenham Hotspur v Manchester City
Wolves v Southampton

NOVEMBER 28
Arsenal v Wolves
Brighton v Liverpool
Chelsea v Tottenham Hotspur
Crystal Palace v Newcastle United
Everton v Leeds United
Leicester City v Fulham
Manchester City v Burnley
Southampton v Manchester United
West Brom v Sheffield United
West Ham United v Aston Villa

DECEMBER 5
Aston Villa v Newcastle United
Brighton v Southampton
Burnley v Everton
Chelsea v Leeds United
Liverpool v Wolves

Feb 6...Aston Villa v Arsenal

Manchester City v Fulham
Sheffield United v Leicester City
Tottenham Hotspur v Arsenal
West Brom v Crystal Palace
West Ham United v Manchester United

DECEMBER 12
Arsenal v Burnley
Crystal Palace v Tottenham Hotspur
Everton v Chelsea
Fulham v Liverpool
Leeds United v West Ham United
Leicester City v Brighton
Manchester United v Manchester City
Newcastle United v West Brom
Southampton v Sheffield United
Wolves v Aston Villa

DECEMBER 15
Arsenal v Southampton
Aston Villa v Burnley
Fulham v Brighton
Leeds United v Newcastle United
Leicester City v Everton
Sheffield United v Manchester United
West Ham United v Crystal Palace
Wolves v Chelsea

DECEMBER 16
Liverpool v Tottenham Hotspur
Manchester City v West Brom

DECEMBER 19
Brighton v Sheffield United
Burnley v Wolves
Chelsea v West Ham United
Crystal Palace v Liverpool
Everton v Arsenal
Manchester United v Leeds United
Newcastle United v Fulham
Southampton v Manchester City
Tottenham Hotspur v Leicester City
West Brom v Aston Villa

DECEMBER 26
Arsenal v Chelsea
Aston Villa v Crystal Palace
Fulham v Southampton
Leeds United v Burnley
Leicester City v Manchester United
Liverpool v West Brom
Manchester City v Newcastle United
Sheffield United v Everton
West Ham United v Brighton
Wolves v Tottenham Hotspur

DECEMBER 28
Brighton v Arsenal
Burnley v Sheffield United
Chelsea v Aston Villa
Crystal Palace v Leicester City
Everton v Manchester City
Manchester United v Wolves
Newcastle United v Liverpool
Southampton v West Ham United
Tottenham Hotspur v Fulham
West Brom v Leeds United

JANUARY 2
Brighton v Wolves
Burnley v Fulham
Chelsea v Manchester City
Crystal Palace v Sheffield United
Everton v West Ham
Manchester United v Aston Villa
Newcastle United v Leicester City
Southampton v Liverpool
Tottenham Hotspur v Leeds United
West Brom v Arsenal

JANUARY 12
Arsenal v Crystal Palace
Aston Villa v Tottenham Hotspur
Fulham v Manchester United
Leeds United v Southampton
Leicester City v Chelsea
Sheffield United v Newcastle United
West Ham United v West Brom
Wolves v Everton

JANUARY 13
Liverpool v Burnley
Manchester City v Brighton

JANUARY 16
Arsenal v Newcastle United
Aston Villa v Everton
Fulham v Chelsea
Leeds United v Brighton
Leicester City v Southampton

Oct 24...Liverpool v Sheffield United

Liverpool v Manchester United
Manchester City v Crystal Palace
Sheffield United v Tottenham Hotspur
West Ham United v Burnley
Wolves v West Brom

JANUARY 26

Brighton v Fulham
Burnley v Aston Villa
Everton v Leicester City
Manchester United v Sheffield United
West Brom v Manchester City

JANUARY 27

Chelsea v Wolves
Newcastle United v Leeds United
Southampton v Arsenal
Tottenham Hotspur v Liverpool
Crystal Palace v West Ham United

JANUARY 30

Arsenal v Manchester United
Brighton v Tottenham Hotspur
Chelsea v Burnley
Crystal Palace v Wolves
Everton v Newcastle United
Leicester City v Leeds United
Manchester City v Sheffield United
Southampton v Aston Villa
West Brom v Fulham
West Ham United v Liverpool

FEBRUARY 2

Aston Villa v West Ham United
Burnley v Manchester City
Fulham v Leicester City
Leeds United v Everton
Sheffield United v West Brom
Wolves v Arsenal
Manchester United v Southampton

FEBRUARY 3

Newcastle United v Crystal Palace
Tottenham Hotspur v Chelsea
Liverpool v Brighton

FEBRUARY 6

Aston Villa v Arsenal
Burnley v Brighton
Fulham v West Ham United
Leeds United v Crystal Palace
Liverpool v Manchester City
Manchester United v Everton
Newcastle United v Southampton
Sheffield United v Chelsea
Tottenham Hotspur v West Brom
Wolves v Leicester City

FEBRUARY 13

Arsenal v Leeds United
Brighton v Aston Villa
Chelsea v Newcastle United
Crystal Palace v Burnley
Everton v Fulham
Leicester City v Liverpool
Manchester City v Tottenham Hotspur
Southampton v Wolves
West Brom v Manchester United
West Ham United v Sheffield United

FEBRUARY 20

Arsenal v Manchester City
Aston Villa v Leicester City
Brighton v Crystal Palace
Burnley v West Brom
Fulham v Sheffield United
Liverpool v Everton
Manchester United v Newcastle United
Southampton v Chelsea
West Ham United v Tottenham Hotspur
Wolves v Leeds United

FEBRUARY 27

Chelsea v Manchester United
Crystal Palace v Fulham
Everton v Southampton
Leeds United v Aston Villa
Leicester City v Arsenal
Manchester City v West Ham United
Newcastle United v Wolves
Sheffield United v Liverpool
Tottenham Hotspur v Burnley
West Brom v Brighton

MARCH 6

Aston Villa v Wolves
Brighton v Leicester City
Burnley v Arsenal
Chelsea v Everton
Liverpool v Fulham
Manchester City v Manchester United
Sheffield United v Southampton
Tottenham Hotspur v Crystal Palace
West Brom v Newcastle United
West Ham United v Leeds United

MARCH 13

Arsenal v Tottenham Hotspur
Crystal Palace v West Brom
Everton v Burnley
Fulham v Manchester City
Leeds United v Chelsea
Leicester City v Sheffield United
Manchester United v West Ham United
Newcastle United v Aston Villa
Southampton v Brighton
Wolves v Liverpool

MARCH 20

Brighton v Newcastle United
Burnley v Leicester City
Crystal Palace v Manchester United
Fulham v Leeds United
Liverpool v Chelsea
Manchester City v Wolves
Sheffield United v Aston Villa
Tottenham Hotspur v Southampton
West Brom v Everton
West Ham United v Arsenal

APRIL 3

Arsenal v Liverpool
Aston Villa v Fulham
Chelsea v West Brom
Everton v Crystal Palace
Leeds United v Sheffield United
Leicester City v Manchester City
Manchester United v Brighton
Newcastle United v Tottenham Hotspur
Southampton v Burnley
Wolves v West Ham United

APRIL 10

Brighton v Everton
Burnley v Newcastle United
Crystal Palace v Chelsea
Fulham v Wolves
Liverpool v Aston Villa
Manchester City v Leeds United
Sheffield United v Arsenal
Tottenham Hotspur v Manchester United

Mar 6...Manchester City v Manchester United

West Brom v Southampton
West Ham United v Leicester City

APRIL 17

Arsenal v Fulham
Aston Villa v Manchester City
Chelsea v Brighton
Everton v Tottenham Hotspur
Leeds United v Liverpool
Leicester City v West Brom
Manchester United v Burnley
Newcastle United v West Ham United
Southampton v Crystal Palace
Wolves v Sheffield United

APRIL 24

Arsenal v Everton
Aston Villa v West Brom
Fulham v Tottenham Hotspur
Leeds United v Manchester United
Leicester City v Crystal Palace
Liverpool v Newcastle United
Manchester City v Southampton
Sheffield United v Brighton
West Ham United v Chelsea
Wolves v Burnley

MAY 1

Brighton v Leeds United
Burnley v West Ham United
Chelsea v Fulham
Crystal Palace v Manchester City
Everton v Aston Villa
Manchester United v Liverpool
Newcastle United v Arsenal
Southampton v Leicester City
Tottenham Hotspur v Sheffield United
West Brom v Wolves

MAY 8

Arsenal v West Brom
Aston Villa v Manchester United
Fulham v Burnley
Leeds United v Tottenham Hotspur
Leicester City v Newcastle United
Liverpool v Southampton
Manchester City v Chelsea
Sheffield United v Crystal Palace
West Ham United v Everton
Wolves v Brighton

MAY 11

Brighton v West Ham United
Burnley v Leeds United
Everton v Sheffield United
Manchester United v Leicester City
West Brom v Liverpool

MAY 12

Chelsea v Arsenal
Newcastle United v Manchester City
Southampton v Fulham
Tottenham Hotspur v Wolves
Crystal Palace v Aston Villa

MAY 15

Brighton v Manchester City
Burnley v Liverpool
Chelsea v Leicester City
Crystal Palace v Arsenal
Everton v Wolves
Manchester United v Fulham
Newcastle United v Sheffield United
Southampton v Leeds United
Tottenham Hotspur v Aston Villa
West Brom v West Ham United

MAY 23

Arsenal v Brighton
Aston Villa v Chelsea
Fulham v Newcastle United
Leeds United v West Brom
Leicester City v Tottenham Hotspur
Liverpool v Crystal Palace
Manchester City v Everton
Sheffield United v Burnley
West Ham United v Southampton
Wolves v Manchester United

LIGUE 1 FIXTURES 2020-21

AUGUST 21
Bordeaux v Nantes
Marseille P-P Saint-Etienne

AUGUST 22
Dijon v Angers
Lille v Rennes

AUGUST 23
Monaco v Reims
Lorient v Strasbourg
Nimes v Brest
Nice v Lens

AUGUST 28
Lyon v Dijon

AUGUST 29
Rennes v Montpellier

AUGUST 30
Reims v Lille
Angers v Bordeaux
Metz v Monaco
Nantes v Nimes
Saint-Etienne v Lorient
Strasbourg v Nice
Brest v Marseille

SEPTEMBER 10
Lens v Paris Saint-Germain

SEPTEMBER 11
Bordeaux v Lyon

SEPTEMBER 12
Montpellier v Nice
Saint-Etienne v Strasbourg

SEPTEMBER 13
Lille v Metz
Angers v Reims
Dijon v Brest
Lorient v Lens
Nimes v Rennes
Monaco v Nantes
Paris Saint-Germain v Marseille

SEPTEMBER 16
Montpellier v Lyon
Paris Saint-Germain v Metz

SEPTEMBER 20
Brest v Lorient
Lens v Bordeaux
Lyon v Nimes
Marseille v Lille
Metz v Reims
Montpellier v Angers
Nantes v Saint-Etienne
Nice v Paris Saint-Germain
Rennes v Monaco
Strasbourg v Dijon

SEPTEMBER 27
Angers v Brest
Bordeaux v Nice
Dijon v Montpellier
Lille v Nantes
Lorient v Lyon
Marseille v Metz
Monaco v Strasbourg
Nimes v Lens
Reims v Paris Saint-Germain
Saint-Etienne v Rennes

OCTOBER 4
Bordeaux v Dijon
Brest v Monaco
Lens v Saint-Etienne
Metz v Lorient
Montpellier v Nimes
Nice v Nantes
Paris Saint-Germain v Angers
Rennes v Reims
Strasbourg v Lille
Lyon v Marseille

Nov 8...Nice v Monaco

OCTOBER 18
Angers v Metz
Dijon v Rennes
Lille v Lens
Marseille v Bordeaux
Monaco v Montpellier
Nantes v Brest
Nimes v Paris Saint-Germain
Reims v Lorient
Saint-Etienne v Nice
Strasbourg v Lyon

OCTOBER 25
Bordeaux v Nimes
Brest v Strasbourg
Lens v Nantes
Lorient v Marseille
Lyon v Monaco
Metz v Saint-Etienne
Montpellier v Reims
Nice v Lille
Paris Saint-Germain v Dijon
Rennes v Angers

NOVEMBER 1
Angers v Nice
Dijon v Lorient
Lille v Lyon
Marseille v Lens
Monaco v Bordeaux
Nantes v Paris Saint-Germain
Nimes v Metz
Reims v Strasbourg
Rennes v Brest
Saint-Etienne v Montpellier

NOVEMBER 8
Bordeaux v Montpellier
Brest v Lille
Lens v Reims
Lorient v Nantes
Metz v Dijon
Nice v Monaco
Nimes v Angers
Paris Saint-Germain v Rennes
Strasbourg v Marseille
Lyon v Saint-Etienne

NOVEMBER 22
Angers v Lyon
Brest v Saint-Etienne
Dijon v Lens
Lille v Lorient
Marseille v Nice
Monaco v Paris Saint-Germain
Montpellier v Strasbourg
Nantes v Metz
Reims v Nimes
Rennes v Bordeaux

NOVEMBER 29
Lens v Angers
Lorient v Montpellier
Lyon v Reims
Marseille v Nantes
Metz v Brest
Monaco v Nimes
Nice v Dijon
Paris Saint-Germain v Bordeaux
Saint-Etienne v Lille
Strasbourg v Rennes

DECEMBER 6
Angers v Lorient
Bordeaux v Brest
Dijon v Saint-Etienne
Lille v Monaco
Metz v Lyon
Montpellier v Paris Saint-Germain
Nantes v Strasbourg
Nimes v Marseille
Reims v Nice
Rennes v Lens

DECEMBER 13
Brest v Reims
Lens v Montpellier
Lille v Bordeaux
Lorient v Nimes
Marseille v Monaco
Nantes v Dijon
Nice v Rennes
Saint-Etienne v Angers
Strasbourg v Metz
Paris Saint-Germain v Lyon

DECEMBER 16
Angers v Strasbourg
Bordeaux v Saint-Etienne
Dijon v Lille
Lyon v Brest
Monaco v Lens
Montpellier v Metz
Nimes v Nice
Paris Saint-Germain v Lorient
Reims v Nantes
Rennes v Marseille

DECEMBER 20
Brest v Montpellier
Dijon v Monaco
Lorient v Rennes
Marseille v Reims
Metz v Lens
Nantes v Angers
Nice v Lyon
Saint-Etienne v Nimes
Strasbourg v Bordeaux
Lille v Paris Saint-Germain

DECEMBER 23
Angers v Marseille
Bordeaux v Reims
Lens v Brest
Lyon v Nantes
Monaco v Saint-Etienne
Montpellier v Lille
Nice v Lorient
Nimes v Dijon
Paris Saint-Germain v Strasbourg
Rennes v Metz

JANUARY 6
Brest v Nice
Lille v Angers
Lorient v Monaco
Lyon v Lens
Marseille v Montpellier
Metz v Bordeaux
Nantes v Rennes
Reims v Dijon
Saint-Etienne v Paris Saint-Germain
Strasbourg v Nimes

JANUARY 10
Bordeaux v Lorient
Dijon v Marseille
Lens v Strasbourg
Metz v Nice
Monaco v Angers
Montpellier v Nantes
Nimes v Lille
Paris Saint-Germain v Brest
Reims v Saint-Etienne
Rennes v Lyon

JANUARY 20
Angers v Paris Saint-Germain
Brest v Rennes
Lille v Reims
Lorient v Dijon
Lyon v Metz
Marseille v Nimes
Montpellier v Monaco
Nantes v Lens
Nice v Bordeaux
Strasbourg v Saint-Etienne

JANUARY 24
Bordeaux v Angers
Dijon v Strasbourg
Lens v Nice
Metz v Nantes
Monaco v Marseille
Nimes v Lorient
Paris Saint-Germain v Montpellier
Reims v Brest
Rennes v Lille
Saint-Etienne v Lyon

JANUARY 31
Angers v Nimes
Brest v Metz
Lille v Dijon
Lorient v Paris Saint-Germain
Lyon v Bordeaux
Marseille v Rennes
Montpellier v Lens
Nantes v Monaco
Nice v Saint-Etienne
Strasbourg v Reims

FEBRUARY 3
Bordeaux v Lille
Dijon v Lyon
Lens v Marseille
Metz v Montpellier
Monaco v Nice
Paris Saint-Germain v Nimes
Reims v Angers
Rennes v Lorient
Saint-Etienne v Nantes
Strasbourg v Brest

FEBRUARY 7
Brest v Bordeaux
Lens v Rennes
Lorient v Reims
Lyon v Strasbourg
Montpellier v Dijon
Nantes v Lille
Nice v Angers
Nimes v Monaco
Saint-Etienne v Metz
Marseille v Paris Saint-Germain

FEBRUARY 14
Angers v Nantes
Bordeaux v Marseille
Dijon v Nimes

Oct 18...Nimes v Paris Saint-Germain

Apr 25...Lyon v Lille

Lille v Brest
Lyon v Montpellier
Metz v Strasbourg
Monaco v Lorient
Paris Saint-Germain v Nice
Reims v Lens
Rennes v Saint-Etienne

FEBRUARY 21
Brest v Lyon
Lens v Dijon
Lorient v Lille
Montpellier v Rennes
Nantes v Marseille
Nice v Metz
Nimes v Bordeaux
Paris Saint-Germain v Monaco
Saint-Etienne v Reims
Strasbourg v Angers

FEBRUARY 28
Angers v Lens
Bordeaux v Metz
Dijon v Paris Saint-Germain
Lille v Strasbourg
Lorient v Saint-Etienne
Monaco v Brest
Nimes v Nantes
Reims v Montpellier
Rennes v Nice
Marseille v Lyon

MARCH 7
Bordeaux v Paris Saint-Germain
Brest v Dijon
Lille v Marseille
Lyon v Rennes
Metz v Angers
Montpellier v Lorient
Nantes v Reims
Nice v Nimes
Saint-Etienne v Lens
Strasbourg v Monaco

MARCH 14
Angers v Saint-Etienne
Dijon v Bordeaux
Lens v Metz
Lorient v Nice
Marseille v Brest
Monaco v Lille
Nimes v Montpellier
Paris Saint-Germain v Nantes
Reims v Lyon
Rennes v Strasbourg

MARCH 21
Brest v Angers
Dijon v Reims
Lille v Nimes
Metz v Rennes
Montpellier v Bordeaux
Nantes v Lorient
Nice v Marseille
Saint-Etienne v Monaco
Strasbourg v Lens
Lyon v Paris Saint-Germain

APRIL 4
Angers v Montpellier
Bordeaux v Strasbourg
Lens v Lyon
Lorient v Brest
Marseille v Dijon
Monaco v Metz
Nantes v Nice
Nimes v Saint-Etienne
Paris Saint-Germain v Lille
Reims v Rennes

APRIL 11
Brest v Nimes
Lens v Lorient
Lyon v Angers
Metz v Lille
Monaco v Dijon
Montpellier v Marseille
Nice v Reims
Rennes v Nantes
Saint-Etienne v Bordeaux
Strasbourg v Paris Saint-Germain

APRIL 18
Angers v Rennes
Bordeaux v Monaco
Brest v Lens
Dijon v Nice
Lille v Montpellier
Marseille v Lorient
Nantes v Lyon
Nimes v Strasbourg
Paris Saint-Germain v Saint-Etienne
Reims v Metz

APRIL 25
Angers v Monaco
Lens v Nimes
Lorient v Bordeaux
Lyon v Lille
Metz v Paris Saint-Germain
Nice v Montpellier
Reims v Marseille
Rennes v Dijon
Saint-Etienne v Brest
Strasbourg v Nantes

MAY 2
Bordeaux v Rennes
Brest v Nantes
Dijon v Metz
Lille v Nice
Lorient v Angers
Marseille v Strasbourg
Monaco v Lyon
Montpellier v Saint-Etienne
Nimes v Reims
Paris Saint-Germain v Lens

MAY 9
Angers v Dijon
Lens v Lille
Lyon v Lorient
Metz v Nimes
Nantes v Bordeaux
Nice v Brest
Reims v Monaco
Rennes v Paris Saint-Germain
Saint-Etienne v Marseille
Strasbourg v Montpellier

MAY 16
Bordeaux v Lens
Dijon v Nantes
Lille v Saint-Etienne
Lorient v Metz
Marseille v Angers
Monaco v Rennes
Montpellier v Brest
Nice v Strasbourg
Nimes v Lyon
Paris Saint-Germain v Reims

MAY 23
Angers v Lille
Brest v Paris Saint-Germain
Lens v Monaco
Lyon v Nice
Metz v Marseille
Nantes v Montpellier
Reims v Bordeaux
Rennes v Nimes
Saint-Etienne v Dijon
Strasbourg v Lorient

BUNDESLIGA FIXTURES 2020-21

SEPTEMBER 19
Cologne v Hoffenheim
Union Berlin v Augsburg
Borussia Dortmund v Bor M'gladbach
Frankfurt v Arminia Bielefeld
Bayern Munich v Schalke
RB Leipzig v Mainz
Werder Bremen v Hertha Berlin
Stuttgart v Freiburg
Wolfsburg v Bayer Leverkusen

SEPTEMBER 26
Mainz v Stuttgart
Bayer Leverkusen v RB Leipzig
Bor M'gladbach v Union Berlin
Arminia Bielefeld v Cologne
Augsburg v Borussia Dortmund
Schalke v Werder Bremen
Hertha Berlin v Frankfurt
Freiburg v Wolfsburg
Hoffenheim v Bayern Munich

OCTOBER 3
Cologne v Bor M'gladbach
Union Berlin v Mainz
Borussia Dortmund v Freiburg
Frankfurt v Hoffenheim
Bayern Munich v Hertha Berlin
RB Leipzig v Schalke
Werder Bremen v Arminia Bielefeld
Stuttgart v Bayer Leverkusen
Wolfsburg v Augsburg

OCTOBER 17
Cologne v Frankfurt
Mainz v Bayer Leverkusen
Bor M'gladbach v Wolfsburg
Arminia Bielefeld v Bayern Munich
Augsburg v RB Leipzig
Schalke v Union Berlin
Hertha Berlin v Stuttgart
Freiburg v Werder Bremen
Hoffenheim v Borussia Dortmund

OCTOBER 24
Union Berlin v Freiburg
Mainz v Bor M'gladbach
Bayer Leverkusen v Augsburg
Borussia Dortmund v Schalke
Bayern Munich v Frankfurt
RB Leipzig v Hertha Berlin
Werder Bremen v Hoffenheim
Stuttgart v Cologne
Wolfsburg v Arminia Bielefeld

OCTOBER 31
Cologne v Bayern Munich
Bor M'gladbach v RB Leipzig
Arminia Bielefeld v Borussia Dortmund
Frankfurt v Werder Bremen
Augsburg v Mainz
Schalke v Stuttgart
Hertha Berlin v Wolfsburg
Freiburg v Bayer Leverkusen
Hoffenheim v Union Berlin

NOVEMBER 7
Union Berlin v Arminia Bielefeld
Mainz v Schalke
Bayer Leverkusen v Bor M'gladbach
Borussia Dortmund v Bayern Munich
Augsburg v Hertha Berlin
RB Leipzig v Freiburg
Werder Bremen v Cologne
Stuttgart v Frankfurt
Wolfsburg v Hoffenheim

NOVEMBER 21
Cologne v Union Berlin
Bor M'gladbach v Augsburg
Arminia Bielefeld v Bayer Leverkusen
Frankfurt v RB Leipzig
Bayern Munich v Werder Bremen
Schalke v Wolfsburg
Hertha Berlin v Borussia Dortmund
Freiburg v Mainz
Hoffenheim v Stuttgart

NOVEMBER 28
Union Berlin v Frankfurt
Mainz v Hoffenheim
Bayer Leverkusen v Hertha Berlin
Borussia Dortmund v Cologne
Bor M'gladbach v Schalke
Augsburg v Freiburg
RB Leipzig v Arminia Bielefeld
Stuttgart v Bayern Munich
Wolfsburg v Werder Bremen

DECEMBER 5
Cologne v Wolfsburg
Arminia Bielefeld v Mainz
Frankfurt v Borussia Dortmund
Bayern Munich v RB Leipzig
Schalke v Bayer Leverkusen
Hertha Berlin v Union Berlin
Freiburg v Bor M'gladbach
Werder Bremen v Stuttgart
Hoffenheim v Augsburg

Nov 7...Borussia Dortmund v Bayern Munich

DECEMBER 12
Union Berlin v Bayern Munich
Mainz v Cologne
Bayer Leverkusen v Hoffenheim
Borussia Dortmund v Stuttgart
Bor M'gladbach v Hertha Berlin
Augsburg v Schalke
RB Leipzig v Werder Bremen
Freiburg v Arminia Bielefeld
Wolfsburg v Frankfurt

DECEMBER 16
Cologne v Bayer Leverkusen
Arminia Bielefeld v Augsburg
Frankfurt v Bor M'gladbach
Bayern Munich v Wolfsburg
Schalke v Freiburg
Hertha Berlin v Mainz
Werder Bremen v Borussia Dortmund
Hoffenheim v RB Leipzig
Stuttgart v Union Berlin

DECEMBER 19
Union Berlin v Borussia Dortmund
Mainz v Werder Bremen
Bayer Leverkusen v Bayern Munich
Bor M'gladbach v Hoffenheim
Augsburg v Frankfurt
Schalke v Arminia Bielefeld
RB Leipzig v Cologne
Freiburg v Hertha Berlin
Wolfsburg v Stuttgart

JANUARY 2
Cologne v Augsburg
Borussia Dortmund v Wolfsburg
Arminia Bielefeld v Bor M'gladbach
Frankfurt v Bayer Leverkusen
Bayern Munich v Mainz
Hertha Berlin v Schalke
Werder Bremen v Union Berlin
Hoffenheim v Freiburg
Stuttgart v RB Leipzig

JANUARY 9
Union Berlin v Wolfsburg
Mainz v Frankfurt
Bayer Leverkusen v Werder Bremen
Bor M'gladbach v Bayern Munich
Arminia Bielefeld v Hertha Berlin
Augsburg v Stuttgart
Schalke v Hoffenheim
RB Leipzig v Borussia Dortmund
Freiburg v Cologne

JANUARY 16
Cologne v Hertha Berlin
Union Berlin v Bayer Leverkusen
Borussia Dortmund v Mainz
Frankfurt v Schalke
Bayern Munich v Freiburg
Werder Bremen v Augsburg
Hoffenheim v Arminia Bielefeld
Stuttgart v Bor M'gladbach
Wolfsburg v RB Leipzig

JANUARY 20
Mainz v Wolfsburg
Bayer Leverkusen v Borussia Dortmund
Bor M'gladbach v Werder Bremen
Arminia Bielefeld v Stuttgart
Augsburg v Bayern Munich
Schalke v Cologne
Hertha Berlin v Hoffenheim
RB Leipzig v Union Berlin
Freiburg v Frankfurt

JANUARY 23
Mainz v RB Leipzig
Bayer Leverkusen v Wolfsburg
Bor M'gladbach v Borussia Dortmund
Arminia Bielefeld v Frankfurt
Augsburg v Union Berlin
Schalke v Bayern Munich
Hertha Berlin v Werder Bremen
Freiburg v Stuttgart
Hoffenheim v Cologne

JANUARY 30
Cologne v Arminia Bielefeld
Union Berlin v Bor M'gladbach
Borussia Dortmund v Augsburg
Frankfurt v Hertha Berlin
Bayern Munich v Hoffenheim

Oct 17...Schalke v Union Berlin

Apr 24...RB Leipzig v Stuttgart

RB Leipzig v Bayer Leverkusen
Werder Bremen v Schalke
Stuttgart v Mainz
Wolfsburg v Freiburg

FEBRUARY 6

Mainz v Union Berlin
Bayer Leverkusen v Stuttgart
Bor M'gladbach v Cologne
Arminia Bielefeld v Werder Bremen
Augsburg v Wolfsburg
Schalke v RB Leipzig
Hertha Berlin v Bayern Munich
Freiburg v Borussia Dortmund
Hoffenheim v Frankfurt

FEBRUARY 13

Union Berlin v Schalke
Bayer Leverkusen v Mainz
Borussia Dortmund v Hoffenheim
Frankfurt v Cologne
Bayern Munich v Arminia Bielefeld
RB Leipzig v Augsburg
Werder Bremen v Freiburg
Stuttgart v Hertha Berlin
Wolfsburg v Bor M'gladbach

FEBRUARY 20

Cologne v Stuttgart
Bor M'gladbach v Mainz
Arminia Bielefeld v Wolfsburg
Frankfurt v Bayern Munich
Augsburg v Bayer Leverkusen
Schalke v Borussia Dortmund
Hertha Berlin v RB Leipzig
Freiburg v Union Berlin
Hoffenheim v Werder Bremen

FEBRUARY 27

Union Berlin v Hoffenheim
Mainz v Augsburg
Bayer Leverkusen v Freiburg
Borussia Dortmund v Arminia Bielefeld
Bayern Munich v Cologne
RB Leipzig v Bor M'gladbach
Werder Bremen v Frankfurt
Stuttgart v Schalke
Wolfsburg v Hertha Berlin

MARCH 6

Cologne v Werder Bremen
Bor M'gladbach v Bayer Leverkusen
Arminia Bielefeld v Union Berlin
Frankfurt v Stuttgart
Bayern Munich v Borussia Dortmund
Schalke v Mainz
Hertha Berlin v Augsburg
Freiburg v RB Leipzig
Hoffenheim v Wolfsburg

MARCH 13

Union Berlin v Cologne
Mainz v Freiburg
Bayer Leverkusen v Arminia Bielefeld
Borussia Dortmund v Hertha Berlin
Augsburg v Bor M'gladbach
RB Leipzig v Frankfurt
Werder Bremen v Bayern Munich
Stuttgart v Hoffenheim
Wolfsburg v Schalke

MARCH 20

Cologne v Borussia Dortmund
Arminia Bielefeld v RB Leipzig
Frankfurt v Union Berlin
Bayern Munich v Stuttgart
Schalke v Bor M'gladbach
Hertha Berlin v Bayer Leverkusen
Freiburg v Augsburg
Werder Bremen v Wolfsburg
Hoffenheim v Mainz

APRIL 3

Union Berlin v Hertha Berlin
Mainz v Arminia Bielefeld
Bayer Leverkusen v Schalke
Borussia Dortmund v Frankfurt
Bor M'gladbach v Freiburg
Augsburg v Hoffenheim
RB Leipzig v Bayern Munich
Stuttgart v Werder Bremen
Wolfsburg v Cologne

APRIL 10

Cologne v Mainz
Arminia Bielefeld v Freiburg
Frankfurt v Wolfsburg
Bayern Munich v Union Berlin
Schalke v Augsburg
Hertha Berlin v Bor M'gladbach
Werder Bremen v RB Leipzig
Hoffenheim v Bayer Leverkusen
Stuttgart v Borussia Dortmund

APRIL 17

Union Berlin v Stuttgart
Mainz v Hertha Berlin
Bayer Leverkusen v Cologne
Borussia Dortmund v Werder Bremen
Bor M'gladbach v Frankfurt
Augsburg v Arminia Bielefeld
RB Leipzig v Hoffenheim
Freiburg v Schalke
Wolfsburg v Bayern Munich

APRIL 21

Cologne v RB Leipzig
Borussia Dortmund v Union Berlin
Arminia Bielefeld v Schalke
Frankfurt v Augsburg
Bayern Munich v Bayer Leverkusen
Hertha Berlin v Freiburg
Werder Bremen v Mainz
Hoffenheim v Bor M'gladbach
Stuttgart v Wolfsburg

APRIL 24

Union Berlin v Werder Bremen
Mainz v Bayern Munich
Bayer Leverkusen v Frankfurt
Bor M'gladbach v Arminia Bielefeld
Augsburg v Cologne
Schalke v Hertha Berlin
RB Leipzig v Stuttgart
Freiburg v Hoffenheim
Wolfsburg v Borussia Dortmund

MAY 8

Cologne v Freiburg
Borussia Dortmund v RB Leipzig
Frankfurt v Mainz
Bayern Munich v Bor M'gladbach
Hertha Berlin v Arminia Bielefeld
Werder Bremen v Bayer Leverkusen
Hoffenheim v Schalke
Stuttgart v Augsburg
Wolfsburg v Union Berlin

MAY 15

Mainz v Borussia Dortmund
Bayer Leverkusen v Union Berlin
Bor M'gladbach v Stuttgart
Arminia Bielefeld v Hoffenheim
Augsburg v Werder Bremen
Schalke v Frankfurt
Hertha Berlin v Cologne
RB Leipzig v Wolfsburg
Freiburg v Bayern Munich

MAY 22

Cologne v Schalke
Union Berlin v RB Leipzig
Borussia Dortmund v Bayer Leverkusen
Frankfurt v Freiburg
Bayern Munich v Augsburg
Werder Bremen v Bor M'gladbach
Hoffenheim v Hertha Berlin
Stuttgart v Arminia Bielefeld
Wolfsburg v Mainz

PRO LEAGUE FIXTURES 2020-21

AUGUST 8
Antwerp v Excel Mouscron
Club Brugge v Charleroi
Standard Liege v Cercle Brugge

AUGUST 9
Kortrijk v Waasland-Beveren
Mechelen v Anderlecht
Sint-Truidense v Gent
Zulte Waregem v Genk

AUGUST 10
OH Leuven v Eupen
Oostende v Beerschot

AUGUST 14
Excel Mouscron v Mechelen

AUGUST 15
Charleroi v Oostende
Genk v OH Leuven
Gent v Kortrijk

AUGUST 16
Anderlecht v Sint-Truidense
Beerschot v Zulte Waregem
Cercle Brugge v Antwerp
Eupen v Club Brugge

AUGUST 17
Waasland-Beveren v Standard Liege

AUGUST 21
Kortrijk v Eupen

AUGUST 22
Antwerp v Gent
Mechelen v Cercle Brugge
OH Leuven v Charleroi
Zulte Waregem v Waasland-Beveren

AUGUST 23
Anderlecht v Excel Mouscron
Club Brugge v Beerschot
Standard Liege v Genk

AUGUST 24
Sint-Truidense v Oostende

AUGUST 28
Oostende v Anderlecht

AUGUST 29
Cercle Brugge v Kortrijk
Excel Mouscron v Zulte Waregem
Eupen v Sint-Truidense
Waasland-Beveren v OH Leuven

AUGUST 30
Beerschot v Standard Liege
Charleroi v Antwerp
Genk v Club Brugge
Gent v Mechelen

SEPTEMBER 11
Eupen v Gent

SEPTEMBER 12
Club Brugge v Waasland-Beveren
Mechelen v Oostende
OH Leuven v Standard Liege

SEPTEMBER 13
Anderlecht v Cercle Brugge
Kortrijk v Excel Mouscron
Sint-Truidense v Antwerp
Zulte Waregem v Charleroi

SEPTEMBER 14
Beerschot v Genk

SEPTEMBER 18
Charleroi v Beerschot

SEPTEMBER 19
Excel Mouscron v Gent
Oostende v OH Leuven
Waasland-Beveren v Anderlecht

SEPTEMBER 20
Antwerp v Eupen
Genk v Mechelen
Standard Liege v Kortrijk
Zulte Waregem v Club Brugge

SEPTEMBER 21
Cercle Brugge v Sint-Truidense

SEPTEMBER 25
Kortrijk v Antwerp

SEPTEMBER 26
Beerschot v Waasland-Beveren
Gent v OH Leuven
Mechelen v Sint-Truidense

SEPTEMBER 27
Anderlecht v Eupen
Club Brugge v Cercle Brugge
Excel Mouscron v Charleroi
Standard Liege v Zulte Waregem

SEPTEMBER 28
Genk v Oostende

OCTOBER 2
Antwerp v Mechelen

OCTOBER 3
Eupen v Cercle Brugge
OH Leuven v Zulte Waregem
Sint-Truidense v Kortrijk
Waasland-Beveren v Genk

OCTOBER 4
Charleroi v Standard Liege
Club Brugge v Anderlecht
Gent v Beerschot
Oostende v Excel Mouscron

OCTOBER 17
Anderlecht v OH Leuven
Beerschot v Sint-Truidense
Cercle Brugge v Gent
Excel Mouscron v Eupen
Genk v Charleroi
Mechelen v Kortrijk
Standard Liege v Club Brugge
Waasland-Beveren v Oostende
Zulte Waregem v Antwerp

OCTOBER 23
Antwerp v Beerschot
Cercle Brugge v Excel Mouscron
Charleroi v Waasland-Beveren
Eupen v Mechelen
Gent v Genk
Kortrijk v Anderlecht
OH Leuven v Club Brugge
Oostende v Zulte Waregem
Sint-Truidense v Standard Liege

OCTOBER 30
Anderlecht v Antwerp
Beerschot v OH Leuven
Charleroi v Cercle Brugge
Club Brugge v Mechelen
Excel Mouscron v Sint-Truidense
Genk v Eupen
Standard Liege v Oostende

Nov 6...Gent v Anderlecht

Jan 22...Antwerp v Oostende

Waasland-Beveren v Gent
Zulte Waregem v Kortrijk

NOVEMBER 6

Antwerp v Standard Liege
Cercle Brugge v Zulte Waregem
Eupen v Waasland-Beveren
Gent v Anderlecht
Kortrijk v Beerschot
Mechelen v Charleroi
OH Leuven v Excel Mouscron
Oostende v Club Brugge
Sint-Truidense v Genk

NOVEMBER 21

Beerschot v Anderlecht
Charleroi v Gent
Club Brugge v Kortrijk
Genk v Excel Mouscron
OH Leuven v Sint-Truidense
Oostende v Antwerp
Standard Liege v Eupen
Waasland-Beveren v Cercle Brugge
Zulte Waregem v Mechelen

NOVEMBER 27

Anderlecht v Standard Liege
Antwerp v OH Leuven
Cercle Brugge v Genk
Eupen v Charleroi
Excel Mouscron v Club Brugge
Gent v Zulte Waregem
Kortrijk v Oostende
Mechelen v Beerschot
Sint-Truidense v Waasland-Beveren

DECEMBER 4

Beerschot v Eupen
Charleroi v Kortrijk
Club Brugge v Sint-Truidense
Genk v Antwerp
OH Leuven v Cercle Brugge
Oostende v Gent
Standard Liege v Mechelen
Waasland-Beveren v Excel Mouscron
Zulte Waregem v Anderlecht

DECEMBER 11

Anderlecht v Genk
Antwerp v Club Brugge
Cercle Brugge v Oostende
Excel Mouscron v Beerschot
Eupen v Zulte Waregem
Gent v Standard Liege
Kortrijk v OH Leuven
Mechelen v Waasland-Beveren
Sint-Truidense v Charleroi

DECEMBER 18

Beerschot v Cercle Brugge
Charleroi v Anderlecht
Club Brugge v Gent
Genk v Kortrijk
OH Leuven v Mechelen
Oostende v Eupen
Standard Liege v Excel Mouscron
Waasland-Beveren v Antwerp
Zulte Waregem v Sint-Truidense

DECEMBER 22

Anderlecht v Oostende
Antwerp v Zulte Waregem
Cercle Brugge v Charleroi
Excel Mouscron v OH Leuven
Eupen v Genk
Gent v Waasland-Beveren
Kortrijk v Standard Liege
Mechelen v Club Brugge
Sint-Truidense v Beerschot

DECEMBER 26

Anderlecht v Beerschot
Antwerp v Charleroi
Club Brugge v Eupen
Genk v Waasland-Beveren
Kortrijk v Gent
Mechelen v Excel Mouscron
OH Leuven v Oostende
Standard Liege v Sint-Truidense
Zulte Waregem v Cercle Brugge

JANUARY 15

Beerschot v Club Brugge
Cercle Brugge v Standard Liege
Charleroi v Mechelen
Excel Mouscron v Genk
Eupen v Anderlecht
Gent v Antwerp
Oostende v Kortrijk
Sint-Truidense v OH Leuven
Waasland-Beveren v Zulte Waregem

JANUARY 22

Anderlecht v Waasland-Beveren
Antwerp v Oostende
Club Brugge v Genk
Kortrijk v Cercle Brugge
Mechelen v Eupen
OH Leuven v Gent
Sint-Truidense v Excel Mouscron
Standard Liege v Charleroi
Zulte Waregem v Beerschot

JANUARY 26

Beerschot v Kortrijk
Cercle Brugge v Club Brugge
Charleroi v OH Leuven
Excel Mouscron v Anderlecht
Eupen v Antwerp
Genk v Zulte Waregem
Gent v Sint-Truidense
Oostende v Standard Liege
Waasland-Beveren v Mechelen

JANUARY 29

Anderlecht v Gent
Antwerp v Waasland-Beveren
Club Brugge v Standard Liege
Eupen v Excel Mouscron
Kortrijk v Charleroi
Mechelen v Genk
OH Leuven v Beerschot
Sint-Truidense v Cercle Brugge
Zulte Waregem v Oostende

FEBRUARY 5

Beerschot v Antwerp
Cercle Brugge v Mechelen
Charleroi v Zulte Waregem
Excel Mouscron v Kortrijk
Genk v Anderlecht
Gent v Eupen
Oostende v Sint-Truidense
Standard Liege v OH Leuven
Waasland-Beveren v Club Brugge

FEBRUARY 9

Anderlecht v Charleroi
Antwerp v Cercle Brugge
Club Brugge v Oostende
Excel Mouscron v Waasland-Beveren
Eupen v Beerschot
Genk v Gent
Kortrijk v Sint-Truidense
Mechelen v Standard Liege
Zulte Waregem v OH Leuven

FEBRUARY 12

Beerschot v Mechelen
Cercle Brugge v Anderlecht
Charleroi v Club Brugge
Gent v Excel Mouscron
OH Leuven v Kortrijk
Oostende v Genk
Sint-Truidense v Zulte Waregem
Standard Liege v Antwerp
Waasland-Beveren v Eupen

FEBRUARY 19

Anderlecht v Kortrijk
Antwerp v Sint-Truidense
Club Brugge v OH Leuven
Excel Mouscron v Cercle Brugge
Eupen v Oostende
Genk v Beerschot
Mechelen v Gent
Waasland-Beveren v Charleroi
Zulte Waregem v Standard Liege

FEBRUARY 26

Beerschot v Excel Mouscron
Cercle Brugge v Waasland-Beveren
Charleroi v Genk
Gent v Club Brugge
Kortrijk v Zulte Waregem
OH Leuven v Antwerp
Oostende v Mechelen
Sint-Truidense v Eupen
Standard Liege v Anderlecht

MARCH 5

Anderlecht v Mechelen
Antwerp v Kortrijk
Charleroi v Sint-Truidense
Club Brugge v Zulte Waregem
Excel Mouscron v Standard Liege
Eupen v OH Leuven
Genk v Cercle Brugge
Gent v Oostende
Waasland-Beveren v Beerschot

MARCH 12

Beerschot v Gent
Cercle Brugge v Eupen
Kortrijk v Genk
Mechelen v Antwerp
OH Leuven v Anderlecht
Oostende v Charleroi
Sint-Truidense v Club Brugge
Standard Liege v Waasland-Beveren
Zulte Waregem v Excel Mouscron

MARCH 19

Anderlecht v Zulte Waregem
Beerschot v Charleroi
Club Brugge v Antwerp
Excel Mouscron v Oostende
Eupen v Kortrijk
Genk v Standard Liege
Gent v Cercle Brugge
Mechelen v OH Leuven
Waasland-Beveren v Sint-Truidense

APRIL 2

Antwerp v Anderlecht
Cercle Brugge v Beerschot
Charleroi v Excel Mouscron
Kortrijk v Club Brugge
OH Leuven v Genk
Oostende v Waasland-Beveren
Sint-Truidense v Mechelen
Standard Liege v Gent
Zulte Waregem v Eupen

APRIL 9

Anderlecht v Club Brugge
Beerschot v Oostende
Cercle Brugge v OH Leuven
Excel Mouscron v Antwerp
Eupen v Standard Liege
Genk v Sint-Truidense
Gent v Charleroi
Mechelen v Zulte Waregem
Waasland-Beveren v Kortrijk

APRIL 16

Antwerp v Genk
Charleroi v Eupen
Club Brugge v Excel Mouscron
Kortrijk v Mechelen
OH Leuven v Waasland-Beveren
Oostende v Cercle Brugge
Sint-Truidense v Anderlecht
Standard Liege v Beerschot
Zulte Waregem v Gent

Mar 12...Sint-Truidense v Club Brugge

EREDIVISIE FIXTURES 2020-21

SEPTEMBER 12
FC Utrecht v AZ
Heerenveen v Willem II
PEC Zwolle v Feyenoord
FC Twente v Fortuna Sittard

SEPTEMBER 13
FC Emmen v VVV-Venlo
Heracles Almelo v ADO Den Haag
Sparta Rotterdam v Ajax
Groningen v PSV
RKC Waalwijk v Vitesse

SEPTEMBER 18
VVV-Venlo v FC Utrecht

SEPTEMBER 19
AZ v PEC Zwolle
Vitesse v Sparta Rotterdam
PSV v FC Emmen
Fortuna Sittard v Heerenveen

SEPTEMBER 20
ADO Den Haag v Groningen
Feyenoord v FC Twente
Willem II v Heracles Almelo
Ajax v RKC Waalwijk

SEPTEMBER 25
FC Twente v Groningen

SEPTEMBER 26
PEC Zwolle v Sparta Rotterdam
Fortuna Sittard v AZ
Heerenveen v VVV-Venlo
Ajax v Vitesse

SEPTEMBER 27
Feyenoord v ADO Den Haag
FC Utrecht v RKC Waalwijk
Heracles Almelo v PSV
FC Emmen v Willem II

OCTOBER 2
FC Utrecht v Heerenveen

OCTOBER 3
Vitesse v Heracles Almelo
RKC Waalwijk v PEC Zwolle
VVV-Venlo v ADO Den Haag
FC Twente v FC Emmen

OCTOBER 4
Groningen v Ajax
Sparta Rotterdam v AZ
Willem II v Feyenoord
PSV v Fortuna Sittard

OCTOBER 17
Ajax v Heerenveen
Heracles Almelo v RKC Waalwijk
Willem II v FC Twente
AZ v VVV-Venlo

OCTOBER 18
Feyenoord v Sparta Rotterdam
ADO Den Haag v Vitesse
FC Emmen v Fortuna Sittard
Groningen v FC Utrecht
PEC Zwolle v PSV

OCTOBER 24
VVV-Venlo v Ajax
FC Utrecht v FC Twente
ADO Den Haag v AZ
Heerenveen v FC Emmen

OCTOBER 25
RKC Waalwijk v Feyenoord
Fortuna Sittard v Groningen
Vitesse v PSV
PEC Zwolle v Willem II
Sparta Rotterdam v Heracles Almelo

OCTOBER 31
Ajax v Fortuna Sittard
Groningen v VVV-Venlo
FC Twente v PEC Zwolle
AZ v RKC Waalwijk

NOVEMBER 1
Heracles Almelo v FC Utrecht
PSV v ADO Den Haag
Sparta Rotterdam v Heerenveen
FC Emmen v Feyenoord
Willem II v Vitesse

NOVEMBER 6
Fortuna Sittard v PEC Zwolle

NOVEMBER 7
ADO Den Haag v FC Twente
VVV-Venlo v Heracles Almelo
Heerenveen v AZ
Vitesse v FC Emmen

NOVEMBER 8
FC Utrecht v Ajax
PSV v Willem II
RKC Waalwijk v Sparta Rotterdam
Feyenoord v Groningen

NOVEMBER 21
Ajax v Heracles Almelo
Willem II v VVV-Venlo
AZ v FC Emmen
PEC Zwolle v FC Utrecht

NOVEMBER 22
Sparta Rotterdam v ADO Den Haag
Groningen v Vitesse
Fortuna Sittard v Feyenoord
FC Twente v PSV
RKC Waalwijk v Heerenveen

NOVEMBER 27
FC Twente v RKC Waalwijk

NOVEMBER 28
ADO Den Haag v Heerenveen
FC Emmen v Ajax
Heracles Almelo v AZ
VVV-Venlo v PEC Zwolle

NOVEMBER 29
Vitesse v Fortuna Sittard
Groningen v Willem II
Feyenoord v FC Utrecht
PSV v Sparta Rotterdam

DECEMBER 4
PEC Zwolle v Vitesse

DECEMBER 5
RKC Waalwijk v VVV-Venlo
AZ v Groningen
Sparta Rotterdam v FC Emmen
Ajax v FC Twente

DECEMBER 6
FC Utrecht v ADO Den Haag
Feyenoord v Heracles Almelo
Fortuna Sittard v Willem II
Heerenveen v PSV

DECEMBER 11
Heracles Almelo v Fortuna Sittard

DECEMBER 12
FC Twente v AZ
FC Emmen v ADO Den Haag
Ajax v PEC Zwolle
Groningen v RKC Waalwijk

DECEMBER 13
PSV v FC Utrecht
Vitesse v Heerenveen
VVV-Venlo v Feyenoord
Willem II v Sparta Rotterdam

DECEMBER 18
PEC Zwolle v FC Emmen

DECEMBER 19
Sparta Rotterdam v Groningen
VVV-Venlo v FC Twente
RKC Waalwijk v PSV
FC Utrecht v Fortuna Sittard

DECEMBER 20
Vitesse v Feyenoord
ADO Den Haag v Ajax
Heerenveen v Heracles Almelo
AZ v Willem II

DECEMBER 22
Fortuna Sittard v RKC Waalwijk
FC Emmen v FC Utrecht
PSV v VVV-Venlo
FC Twente v Sparta Rotterdam

Nov 7...ADO Den Haag v FC Twente

Feb 7...Ajax v FC Utrecht

DECEMBER 23
AZ v Vitesse
Willem II v Ajax
ADO Den Haag v PEC Zwolle
Groningen v Heracles Almelo
Feyenoord v Heerenveen

JANUARY 9
RKC Waalwijk v ADO Den Haag
FC Emmen v FC Twente
Heracles Almelo v Vitesse
PEC Zwolle v AZ
FC Utrecht v Groningen

JANUARY 10
Sparta Rotterdam v Feyenoord
Heerenveen v Fortuna Sittard
VVV-Venlo v Willem II
Ajax v PSV

JANUARY 12
Vitesse v FC Utrecht
Heracles Almelo v FC Emmen

JANUARY 13
PSV v AZ
ADO Den Haag v VVV-Venlo
Fortuna Sittard v Sparta Rotterdam
Feyenoord v PEC Zwolle

JANUARY 14
Heerenveen v RKC Waalwijk
FC Twente v Ajax
Willem II v Groningen

JANUARY 16
FC Emmen v Vitesse
FC Utrecht v Heracles Almelo
AZ v ADO Den Haag
PEC Zwolle v Fortuna Sittard

JANUARY 17
RKC Waalwijk v Willem II
Groningen v FC Twente
Sparta Rotterdam v PSV
Ajax v Feyenoord
VVV-Venlo v Heerenveen

JANUARY 22
ADO Den Haag v FC Emmen

JANUARY 23
Willem II v PEC Zwolle
Vitesse v Groningen
PSV v RKC Waalwijk
Heracles Almelo v Heerenveen

JANUARY 24
Fortuna Sittard v Ajax
FC Twente v VVV-Venlo
FC Utrecht v Sparta Rotterdam
Feyenoord v AZ

JANUARY 26
PEC Zwolle v Heracles Almelo
FC Emmen v PSV
Groningen v ADO Den Haag

JANUARY 27
AZ v FC Utrecht
RKC Waalwijk v Fortuna Sittard
VVV-Venlo v Vitesse
Heerenveen v Feyenoord

JANUARY 28
Sparta Rotterdam v FC Twente
Ajax v Willem II

JANUARY 30
Heracles Almelo v Groningen
FC Utrecht v PEC Zwolle
Fortuna Sittard v VVV-Venlo
Vitesse v RKC Waalwijk

JANUARY 31
FC Twente v Heerenveen
Feyenoord v PSV
Willem II v FC Emmen
ADO Den Haag v Sparta Rotterdam
AZ v Ajax

FEBRUARY 5
Fortuna Sittard v Heracles Almelo

FEBRUARY 6
PSV v FC Twente
PEC Zwolle v RKC Waalwijk
FC Emmen v AZ
Heerenveen v Vitesse

FEBRUARY 7
Ajax v FC Utrecht
Groningen v Feyenoord
Willem II v ADO Den Haag
VVV-Venlo v Sparta Rotterdam

FEBRUARY 14
ADO Den Haag v PSV
AZ v Heerenveen
Groningen v PEC Zwolle
FC Utrecht v VVV-Venlo
Feyenoord v Willem II
Heracles Almelo v Ajax
RKC Waalwijk v FC Emmen
Sparta Rotterdam v Fortuna Sittard
Vitesse v FC Twente

FEBRUARY 21
Ajax v Sparta Rotterdam
FC Emmen v PEC Zwolle
FC Twente v Feyenoord
Fortuna Sittard v ADO Den Haag
PSV v Vitesse
RKC Waalwijk v Heracles Almelo
Heerenveen v Groningen
VVV-Venlo v AZ
Willem II v FC Utrecht

FEBRUARY 28
ADO Den Haag v RKC Waalwijk
AZ v Feyenoord
Groningen v Fortuna Sittard
FC Utrecht v FC Emmen
Heracles Almelo v FC Twente
PEC Zwolle v Heerenveen
PSV v Ajax
Sparta Rotterdam v Willem II
Vitesse v VVV-Venlo

MARCH 7
Ajax v Groningen
FC Emmen v Sparta Rotterdam
FC Twente v Willem II
Feyenoord v VVV-Venlo
Fortuna Sittard v PSV
Heracles Almelo v PEC Zwolle
RKC Waalwijk v FC Utrecht
Heerenveen v ADO Den Haag
Vitesse v AZ

MARCH 14
ADO Den Haag v Heracles Almelo
AZ v FC Twente
Groningen v FC Emmen
FC Utrecht v Vitesse
PEC Zwolle v Ajax
PSV v Feyenoord
Sparta Rotterdam v RKC Waalwijk
VVV-Venlo v Fortuna Sittard
Willem II v Heerenveen

Apr 11...AZ v Sparta Rotterdam

MARCH 21
Ajax v ADO Den Haag
AZ v PSV
Feyenoord v FC Emmen
Fortuna Sittard v FC Utrecht
Heracles Almelo v Sparta Rotterdam
PEC Zwolle v VVV-Venlo
RKC Waalwijk v Groningen
Heerenveen v FC Twente
Vitesse v Willem II

APRIL 4
ADO Den Haag v FC Utrecht
FC Emmen v RKC Waalwijk
FC Twente v Vitesse
Feyenoord v Fortuna Sittard
PSV v Heracles Almelo
Heerenveen v Ajax
Sparta Rotterdam v PEC Zwolle
VVV-Venlo v Groningen
Willem II v AZ

APRIL 11
AZ v Sparta Rotterdam
Groningen v Heerenveen
FC Utrecht v Feyenoord
Fortuna Sittard v FC Emmen
Heracles Almelo v Willem II
PEC Zwolle v FC Twente
RKC Waalwijk v Ajax
Vitesse v ADO Den Haag
VVV-Venlo v PSV

APRIL 25
ADO Den Haag v Fortuna Sittard
Ajax v AZ
FC Emmen v Heracles Almelo
FC Twente v FC Utrecht
Feyenoord v Vitesse
PSV v Groningen
Heerenveen v PEC Zwolle
Sparta Rotterdam v VVV-Venlo
Willem II v RKC Waalwijk

MAY 2
ADO Den Haag v Feyenoord
Ajax v FC Emmen
Groningen v Sparta Rotterdam
FC Utrecht v Willem II
Fortuna Sittard v FC Twente
Heracles Almelo v VVV-Venlo
PSV v Heerenveen
RKC Waalwijk v AZ
Vitesse v PEC Zwolle

MAY 9
AZ v Fortuna Sittard
FC Emmen v Groningen
FC Twente v Heracles Almelo
Feyenoord v Ajax
PEC Zwolle v ADO Den Haag
Heerenveen v FC Utrecht
Sparta Rotterdam v Vitesse
VVV-Venlo v RKC Waalwijk
Willem II v PSV

MAY 13
ADO Den Haag v Willem II
Ajax v VVV-Venlo
FC Emmen v Heerenveen
Groningen v AZ
Fortuna Sittard v Vitesse
Heracles Almelo v Feyenoord
PSV v PEC Zwolle
RKC Waalwijk v FC Twente
Sparta Rotterdam v FC Utrecht

MAY 16
AZ v Heracles Almelo
FC Twente v ADO Den Haag
FC Utrecht v PSV
Feyenoord v RKC Waalwijk
PEC Zwolle v Groningen
Heerenveen v Sparta Rotterdam
Vitesse v Ajax
VVV-Venlo v FC Emmen
Willem II v Fortuna Sittard

Club football

All concluded league tables from 2019-2020. Champions (C), relegated (R) and if null and void, no (C) and (R) included.

EUROPE

ALBANIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tirana (C)	36	21	7	8	67	35	70
Kukesi	36	19	9	8	59	31	66
Laci	36	19	7	10	61	34	64
Skenderbeu	36	17	7	12	42	43	58
Teuta	36	15	12	9	41	34	57
Partizani	36	15	8	13	51	40	53
Bylis	36	12	15	9	46	38	51
Vllaznia*	36	12	10	14	36	41	46
Flamurtari (R)	36	2	9	25	32	72	15
Luftetari (R)	36	2	8	26	19	86	14

Vllaznia beat Kategoria e Pare's Beselidhja 3-1 in the relegation play-off.

ANDORRA

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Inter Club d'Escaldes (C)	24	15	7	2	41	14	52
FC Santa Coloma	24	15	6	3	48	12	51
Engordany	24	11	6	7	35	29	39
Sant Julia	24	11	3	10	27	30	36

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
UE Santa Coloma	24	11	6	7	34	26	39
Atletic Club d'Escaldes	24	8	6	10	32	29	30
Carroi*	24	3	3	18	14	42	12
Ordino (R)	24	2	3	19	15	64	9

Carroi beat Segona Divisio's La Massana 4-1 in the relegation play-off.

ARMENIA

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ararat-Armenia (C)	28	15	7	6	45	23	52
Noah	28	14	6	8	37	27	48
Alashkert	28	14	5	9	51	31	47
Shirak	28	13	7	8	40	30	46
Lori*	27	10	10	7	35	33	40
Ararat*	27	9	6	12	31	36	33

Lori's last game of the season v Ararat was cancelled as a result of positive COVID-19 tests for 17 Lori players and staff.

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Urartu	24	10	6	8	32	27	36
Pyunik	24	10	2	12	45	42	32
Gandzasar	24	8	7	9	31	29	31
Yerevan* (R)	24	0	0	24	11	80	0

Yerevan withdrew from the league due to financial and technical problems.

CROATIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dinamo Zagreb (C)	36	25	5	6	62	20	80
Lokomotiva Zagreb	36	19	8	9	57	38	65
Rijeka	36	19	7	10	58	42	64
Osijek	36	17	11	8	47	29	62
Hajduk Split	36	18	6	12	60	41	60
Gorica	36	12	13	11	44	48	49
Slaven Koprivnica	36	10	9	17	34	51	39
Varazfin	36	9	9	18	29	50	36
Istra 1961*	36	5	10	21	27	59	25
Inter Zapresic (R)	36	3	8	25	32	72	17

Istra 1961 beat 2. HNL's Orijent 1919 3-1 on agg in the relegation play-off.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Slavia Prague (C)	35	26	7	2	69	12	85
Viktoria Plzen	35	23	7	5	68	24	76
Sparta Prague	35	17	9	9	66	40	60
Jablonec	35	14	9	12	48	52	51
Slovan Liberec*	35	15	6	14	55	51	51
Banik Ostrava	35	12	11	12	47	43	47

Slovan Liberec qualify for the Europa League play-off final.

Europa League Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ceske Budejovice	30	13	4	13	46	45	43
Bohemians 1905	30	12	6	12	38	41	42
Slovacko	30	11	9	10	35	35	42
Mlada Boleslav	30	11	7	12	48	52	40

Europa League Play-Offs

First Round

1st legs – Jun 21; 2nd legs – Jun 27

Mlada Boleslav v Ceske Budejovice 2-1, 2-0 *(agg 4-1)*

Slovacko v Bohemians 1905 1-2, 1-2 *(agg 2-4)*

Second Round

1st leg – Jul 4; 2nd leg – Jul 7

Mlada Boleslav v Bohemians 1905 3-0, 1-2 *(agg 4-2)*

Final

Jul 12

Slovan Liberec 2 Mlada Boleslav 0

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sigma Olomouc	33	9	13	11	39	40	40
Teplice	33	9	11	13	37	51	38
Zlin	33	9	6	18	30	52	33
Karvina*	33	5	12	16	25	46	27
Opava*	33	5	10	18	17	50	25
Pribram	33	6	7	20	21	55	25

Last two rounds of matches were postponed due to positive COVID-19 tests for players from Karvina and Opava. As a result, there was no relegation and the number of teams for 2020-2021 will be increased to 18.

DENMARK

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Midtjylland (C)	36	26	4	6	61	29	82
Copenhagen	36	21	5	10	58	42	68
AGF	36	19	7	10	58	41	64
Brondby	36	16	8	12	56	42	56
AaB	36	16	6	14	54	44	54
Nordsjaelland	36	13	8	15	59	54	47

Relegation Round Group 1

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
OB	32	12	7	13	43	42	43
SonderjyskE	32	9	11	12	37	49	38
Lyngby*	32	9	7	16	34	54	34
Silkeborg (R)	32	6	8	18	43	59	26

Relegation Round Group 2

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Horsens	32	13	7	12	36	50	46
Randers	32	13	6	13	51	45	45
Hobro* (R)	32	5	15	12	35	48	30
Esbjerg (R)	32	5	7	20	32	58	22

Lyngby beat Hobro 4-3 on agg in the relegation play-off.

ENGLAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool (C)	38	32	3	3	85	33	99
Man. City	38	26	3	9	102	35	81
Man. United	38	18	12	8	66	36	66
Chelsea	38	20	6	12	69	54	66
Leicester City	38	18	8	12	67	41	62
Tottenham	38	16	11	11	61	47	59
Wolves	38	15	14	9	51	40	59
Arsenal	38	14	14	10	56	48	56
Sheffield United	38	14	12	12	39	39	54
Burnley	38	15	9	14	43	50	54
Southampton	38	15	7	16	51	60	52
Everton	38	13	10	15	44	56	49
Newcastle United	38	11	11	16	38	58	44
Crystal Palace	38	11	10	17	31	50	43
Brighton	38	9	14	15	39	54	41
West Ham United	38	10	9	19	49	62	39
Aston Villa	38	9	8	21	41	67	35
Bournemouth (R)	38	9	7	22	40	65	34
Watford (R)	38	8	10	20	36	64	34
Norwich City (R)	38	5	6	27	26	75	21

ITALY

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Juventus (C)	38	26	5	7	76	43	83
Internazionale	38	24	10	4	81	36	82
Atalanta	38	23	9	6	98	48	78
Lazio	38	24	6	8	79	42	78
Roma	38	21	7	10	77	51	70
Milan	38	19	9	10	63	46	66
Napoli	38	18	8	12	61	50	62
Sassuolo	38	14	9	15	69	63	51
Verona	38	12	13	13	47	51	49
Fiorentina	38	12	13	13	51	48	49
Parma	38	14	7	17	56	57	49
Bologna	38	12	11	15	52	65	47
Udinese	38	12	9	17	37	51	45
Cagliari	38	11	12	15	52	56	45
Sampdoria	38	12	6	20	48	65	42
Torino	38	11	7	20	46	68	40
Genoa	38	10	9	19	47	73	39
Lecce (R)	38	9	8	21	52	85	35
Brescia (R)	38	6	7	25	35	79	25
SPAL (R)	38	5	5	28	27	77	20

KOSOVO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Drita (C)	33	21	5	7	57	23	68
Gjilani	33	21	5	7	61	27	68
Ballkani	33	19	10	4	59	25	67
Prishtina	33	18	8	7	59	25	62
Feronikeli	33	14	5	14	50	40	47
Llapi	33	13	6	14	51	62	45
Trepca '89	33	12	8	13	55	55	44
Drenica	33	12	8	13	39	40	44
Flamurtari (R)	33	12	7	14	42	56	43
Ferizaj (R)	33	9	2	22	34	70	29
Vushtrria (R)	33	5	6	22	34	76	21
Dukagjini (R)	33	5	4	24	27	69	19

MONTENEGRO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Buducnost (C)	31	23	4	4	63	26	73
Sutjeska	31	15	10	6	57	31	55
Iskra	31	15	8	8	43	33	53
Zeta	31	9	14	8	29	30	41
Podgorica	31	8	16	7	34	27	40
Petrovac	31	9	10	12	30	46	37
Rudar	31	10	5	16	38	57	35
Titograd*	31	7	10	14	29	38	31
Kom** (R)	31	6	11	14	36	45	29
Grbalj (R)	31	4	10	17	23	49	22

Titograd beat Second League's Bokelj on penalties (1-1 on agg) in the relegation play-offs.
Kom lost to Second League's Jezero 3-2 on agg in the relegation play-offs.

PORTUGAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Porto (C)	34	26	4	4	74	22	82
Benfica	34	24	5	5	71	26	77
Braga	34	18	6	10	61	40	60
Sporting CP	34	18	6	10	49	34	60
Rio Ave	34	15	10	9	48	36	55
Famalicao	34	14	12	8	53	51	54
Vitoria Guimaraes	34	13	11	10	53	38	50
Moreirense	34	10	13	11	42	44	43
Santa Clara	34	11	10	13	36	41	43
Gil Vicente	34	11	10	13	40	44	43
Maritimo	34	9	12	13	34	42	39
Boavista	34	10	9	15	28	39	39
Pacos de Ferreira	34	11	6	17	36	52	39
Tondela	34	9	9	16	30	44	36
Belenenses	34	9	8	17	27	54	35
Vitoria Setubal* (R)	34	7	13	14	27	43	34
Portimonense	34	7	12	15	30	45	33
Aves* (R)	34	5	2	27	24	68	17

Vitoria Setubal and Aves failed to produce valid licensing documentation to compete in the 2020-21 seasons of the Primeira Liga and LigaPro, so were punished with direct relegation to the Campeonato de Portugal, the third tier of Portuguese football.

ROMANIA

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cluj (C)	10	7	2	1	17	7	49
Universitatea Craiova	9	7	0	2	17	14	44
Astra	8	3	3	2	12	8	33
Botocani	10	2	3	5	10	12	32
FCSB	9	2	3	4	13	14	31
Gaz Metan Medias	10	0	3	7	5	19	25

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Viitorul	14	6	5	3	25	17	43
Hermannstadt	12	6	4	2	18	14	35
Sepsi	13	4	5	4	19	17	34
Academica Clinceni	14	7	0	7	14	21	32
Voluntari	14	6	3	5	16	12	31
Politehnica Iasi	14	5	4	5	17	17	30
Dinamo Bucharest	9	2	2	5	8	11	25
Chindia Targoviste*	12	3	1	8	9	17	23

Chindia Targoviste beat Liga II's Mioveni 3-1 on agg in the relegation play-off.

RUSSIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zenit (C)	30	22	6	2	65	18	72
Lokomotiv Moscow	30	16	9	5	41	29	57
Krasnodar	30	14	10	6	49	30	52
CSKA Moscow	30	14	8	8	43	29	50
Rostov	30	12	9	9	45	50	45
Dynamo Moscow	30	11	8	11	27	30	41
Spartak Moscow	30	11	6	13	35	33	39
Arsenal Tula	30	11	5	14	37	41	38
Ufa	30	8	14	8	22	24	38
Rubin Kazan	30	8	11	11	18	28	35
Ural	30	9	8	13	36	53	35
Sochi	30	8	9	13	40	39	33
Akhmat Grozny	30	7	10	13	27	46	31
Tambov	30	9	4	17	37	41	31
Krylya Sovetov (R)	30	8	7	15	33	40	31
Orenburg (R)	30	7	6	17	28	52	27

SLOVENIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Celje (C)	36	19	12	5	74	36	69
Maribor	36	20	7	9	66	39	67
Olimpija	36	20	7	9	73	44	67
Mura	36	14	14	8	54	42	56
Aluminij	36	16	7	13	58	48	55
Bravo	36	13	10	13	50	53	49
Tabor Sezana	36	13	7	16	45	51	46
Domzale	36	12	7	17	52	64	43
Triglav* (R)	36	9	5	22	44	87	32
Rudar (R)	36	0	12	24	28	80	12

Triglav lost to Second League's Gorica 6-1 on agg in the relegation play-off.

SWITZERLAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Young Boys (C)	36	23	7	6	80	41	76
St. Gallen	36	21	5	10	79	56	68
Basle	36	18	8	10	74	38	62
Servette	36	12	13	11	57	48	49
Lugano	36	11	14	11	46	46	47
Luzern	36	13	7	16	42	50	46
Zurich	36	12	7	17	45	72	43
Sion	36	10	9	17	40	55	39
Thun* (R)	36	10	8	18	45	67	38
Neuchatel Xamax (R)	36	5	12	19	33	68	27

**Thun lost to Swiss Challenge League's Vaduz 5-4 on agg in the relegation play-off.*

TURKEY

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Istanbul Basakselir (C)	34	20	9	5	65	34	69
Trabzonspor	34	18	11	5	76	42	65
Besiktas	34	19	5	10	59	40	62
Sivasspor	34	17	9	8	55	38	60
Alanyaspor	34	16	9	9	61	37	57
Galatasaray	34	15	11	8	55	37	56
Fenerbahce	34	15	8	11	58	46	53
Gaziantep	34	11	13	10	49	50	46
Antalyaspor	34	11	12	11	41	52	45
Kasimpasa	34	12	7	15	53	58	43
Goztepe	34	11	9	14	44	49	42
Genclerbirligi	34	9	9	16	39	56	36
Konyaspor	34	8	12	14	36	52	36
Denizlispor	34	9	8	17	31	48	35
Rizespor	34	10	5	19	38	57	35
Yeni Malatyaspor	34	8	8	18	44	51	32
Kayserispor	34	8	8	18	40	72	32
Ankaragucu	34	7	11	16	31	56	32

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Matches from the quarter-finals onwards were played in Lisbon, Portugal.

Round of 16

Aug 7: Juventus (Ita) 2 Lyon (Fra) 1
(agg 2-2 – Lyon win on away goals)
Aug 7: Man. City (Eng) 2 Real Madrid (Spa) 1
(agg 4-2)
Aug 8: Barcelona (Spa) 3 Napoli (Ita) 1
(agg 4-2)
Aug 8: Bayern Munich (Ger) 4 Chelsea 1 (Eng)
(agg 7-1)

Quarter-Finals

Aug 12: Atalanta (Ita) 1 PSG (Fra) 2
Aug 13: RB Leipzig (Ger) 2 Atletico Madrid (Spa) 1
Aug 14: Barcelona 2 Bayern Munich 8
Aug 15: Man. City 1 Lyon 3

Semi-Finals

Aug 18: RB Leipzig 0 PSG 3
Aug 19: Lyon 0 Bayern Munich 3

Final

Aug 23: PSG 0 Bayern Munich 1

EUROPA LEAGUE

Matches from the quarter-finals onwards were played in Gelsenkirchen, Cologne, Dusseldorf and Duisburg, Germany.

Round of 16

Aug 5: Copenhagen (Den) 3
Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 0
(agg 3-1)
Aug 5: Internazionale (Ita) 2 Getafe (Spa) 0
Aug 5: Manchester United (Eng) 2
LASK (Aut) 1
(agg 7-1)
Aug 5: Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 3
Wolfsburg (Ger) 0
(agg 5-1)
Aug 6: Basle (Swi) 1 Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 0
(agg 4-0)
Aug 6: Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 1 Rangers (Sco) 0
(agg 4-1)
Aug 6: Sevilla (Spa) 2 Roma (Ita) 0
Aug 6: Wolves (Eng) 1 Olympiakos (Gre) 0
(agg 2-1)

Quarter-Finals

Aug 10: Manchester United 1 Copenhagen 0 *(aet)*
Aug 10: Internazionale 2 Bayer Leverkusen 1
Aug 11: Shakhtar Donetsk 4 Basle 1
Aug 11: Wolves 0 Sevilla 1

Semi-Finals

Aug 16: Sevilla 2 Manchester United 1
Aug 16: Internazionale 5 Shakhtar Donetsk 0

Final

Aug 21: Sevilla 3 Internazionale 2

AFRICA

BENIN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ayema	19	10	6	3	29	13	36
Esae	19	10	5	4	17	11	35
Buffles	19	7	9	3	17	9	30
Dragons	19	7	8	4	19	12	29
Pantheres	19	6	10	3	19	15	28
ASPAC	19	6	9	4	21	16	27
Beke Bembereke	19	6	8	5	21	16	26
Tonnerre	19	5	10	4	17	17	25
Energie	19	5	8	6	16	16	23
JSP	19	5	8	6	16	20	23
Real Sport	19	6	5	8	13	17	23
ASVO	19	5	7	7	16	18	22
JAC	19	5	6	8	15	20	21
Dynamo Unacob	19	5	6	8	14	20	21
USSK	19	4	6	9	14	29	18
UPI-ONM	19	2	5	12	12	27	11

TANZANIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Simba (C)	38	27	7	4	78	21	88
Young Africans	38	19	15	4	45	28	72
Azam	38	20	10	8	52	26	70
Namungo	38	17	13	8	46	37	64
Polisi Tanzania	38	15	10	13	37	35	55
JKT Tanzania	38	13	15	10	34	32	54
Coastal Union	38	14	11	13	33	30	53
Kagera Sugar	38	15	7	16	44	41	52
Biashara United	38	12	14	12	29	27	50
Tanzania Prisons	38	10	19	9	35	30	49
Mwadui	38	12	11	15	39	45	47
Ruvu Shooting	38	12	11	15	34	42	47
KMC	38	13	7	18	35	47	46
Mtibwa Sugar	38	11	12	15	30	34	45
Mbeya City	38	12	9	17	33	42	45
Mbao	38	12	9	17	33	43	45
Alliance (R)	38	11	12	15	36	48	45
Lipuli (R)	38	12	8	18	43	51	44
Ndanda (R)	38	9	14	15	28	35	41
Singida United (R)	38	4	6	28	23	73	18

ZAMBIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nkana (C)	27	14	8	5	35	18	50
Forest Rangers	27	14	8	5	32	19	50
Green Eagles	27	13	9	5	34	19	48
NAPSA Stars	27	14	6	7	36	22	48
ZESCO United	27	13	8	6	38	23	47
Power Dynamos	27	12	8	7	34	19	44
Zanaco	27	12	8	7	37	26	44
Kabwe Warriors	27	12	5	10	29	29	41
Lusaka Dynamos	27	11	7	9	33	28	40
Red Arrows	27	11	7	9	26	28	40
Green Buffaloes	27	10	8	9	28	27	38
Nkwazi	27	6	14	7	18	20	32
Buildcon	27	8	8	11	29	35	32
Lumwana Radiants	27	8	7	12	21	22	31
Kansanshi Dynamos	27	6	10	11	19	24	28
Mufulira Wanderers (R)	27	4	5	18	17	39	17
Nakambala Leopards (R)	27	4	5	18	15	45	17
Kabwe YSA (R)	27	3	5	19	16	54	14

CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Semi-finals will be played on a home and away basis. The final will be played at a neutral venue.

Semi-Finals First Leg

Sep 25: Wydad Casablanca (Mor) v Al Ahly (Egy)
Sep 26: Raja Casablanca (Mor) v Zamalek (Egy)

Semi-Finals Second Leg

Oct 2: Al Ahly v Wydad Casablanca
Oct 3: Zamalek v Raja Casablanca

CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Semi-finals and final (on September 27) to be played behind closed doors in Morocco.

Semi-Finals

Sep 22: Pyramids (Egy) v Horoya (Gui);
RS Berkane (Mor) v Hassania Agadir (Mor)

ASIA

SYRIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tishreen (C)	26	18	5	3	44	15	59
Wathba	26	17	5	4	45	13	56
Hottin	26	15	8	3	40	17	53
Al Jaish	26	14	7	5	48	22	49
Al Wahda	26	11	11	4	30	18	44
Al Ittihad	26	11	10	5	34	22	43
Al Shorta	26	10	5	11	26	27	35
Al Karama	26	8	9	9	20	19	33
Al Taliya	26	7	8	11	24	29	29
Foutoua	26	5	8	13	20	49	23
Jabala	26	4	10	12	19	37	22
Al Sahel	26	5	7	14	20	42	22
Al Nawaeir (R)	26	4	7	15	22	40	19
Al Jazira (R)	26	1	4	21	14	57	7

CONCACAF

ARUBA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
RCA	11	10	1	0	23	1	31
Dakota	11	9	1	1	32	10	28
Nacional	11	5	3	3	42	13	18
Bubali	11	4	3	4	24	21	15
Estrella	11	4	3	4	22	20	15
Caravel	11	4	1	6	15	21	13
Brazil Juniors	11	4	1	6	24	37	13
Britannia	11	3	3	5	19	20	12
La Fama	11	3	2	6	22	21	11
United	11	0	0	11	7	66	0

USA

MLS Is Back Tournament

Competition played between July 8 and August 11. The group stage counted towards the 2020 MLS regular season, while the winners qualified for the 2021 CONCACAF Champions League. FC Dallas and Nashville withdrew prior to the tournament after several positive COVID-19 tests.

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Orlando City*	3	2	1	0	6	3	7
Philadelphia Union*	3	2	1	0	4	2	7
New York City FC*	3	1	0	2	2	4	3
Inter Miami	3	0	0	3	2	5	0

**Advanced to the knockout stage.*

Jul 8: Orlando City 2 Inter Miami 1.
Jul 9: New York City FC 0 Philadelphia Union 1.
Jul 14: New York City FC 1 Orlando City 3;
Philadelphia Union 2 Inter Miami 1.
Jul 20: Inter Miami 0 New York City FC 1;
Philadelphia Union 1 Orlando City 1.

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
San Jose Earthquakes*	3	2	1	0	6	3	7
Seattle Sounders*	3	1	1	1	4	2	4
Vancouver Whitecaps*	3	1	0	2	5	7	3
Chicago Fire	3	1	0	2	2	5	3

**Advanced to the knockout stage.*

Jul 10: Seattle Sounders 0 San Jose Earthquakes 0.
Jul 14: Chicago Fire 2 Seattle Sounders 1.
Jul 15: Vancouver Whitecaps 3 San Jose Earthquakes 4.
Jul 19: Chicago Fire 0 San Jose Earthquakes 2;
Seattle Sounders 3 Vancouver Whitecaps 0.
Jul 23: Chicago Fire 0 Vancouver Whitecaps 2.

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Toronto FC*	3	1	2	0	6	5	5
New England Revolution*	3	1	2	0	2	1	5
Montreal Impact*	3	1	0	2	4	5	3
D.C. United	3	0	2	1	3	4	2

**Advanced to the knockout stage.*

Jul 9: Montreal Impact 0 New England Revolution 1.
Jul 13: Toronto FC 2 D.C. United 2.
Jul 16: Montreal Impact 3 Toronto FC 4.
Jul 17: D.C. United 1 New England Revolution 1.
Jul 21: Toronto FC 0 New England Revolution 0;
Montreal Impact 1 D.C. United 0.

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sporting Kansas City*	3	2	0	1	6	4	6
Minnesota United*	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Real Salt Lake*	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Colorado Rapids	3	0	1	2	4	7	1

**Advanced to the knockout stage.*

Jul 12: Sporting Kansas City 1 Minnesota United 2;
Real Salt Lake 2 Colorado Rapids 0.
Jul 17: Sporting Kansas City 3 Colorado Rapids 2;
Real Salt Lake 0 Minnesota United 0.
Jul 22: Real Salt Lake 0 Sporting Kansas City 2;
Colorado Rapids 2 Minnesota United 2.

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Columbus Crew*	3	3	0	0	7	0	9
FC Cincinnati*	3	2	0	1	3	4	6
New York Red Bulls	3	1	0	2	1	4	3
Atlanta United	3	0	0	3	0	3	0

**Advanced to the knockout stage.*

Jul 11: Atlanta United 0 New York Red Bulls 1;
FC Cincinnati 0 Columbus Crew 4.
Jul 16: Atlanta United 0 FC Cincinnati 1;
Columbus Crew 2 New York Red Bulls 0.
Jul 21: Atlanta United 0 Columbus Crew 1.
Jul 22: FC Cincinnati 2 New York Red Bulls 0.

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Portland Timbers*	3	2	1	0	6	4	7
Los Angeles FC*	3	1	2	0	11	7	5
Houston Dynamo	3	0	2	1	5	6	2
LA Galaxy	3	0	1	2	4	9	1

**Advanced to the knockout stage.*

Jul 13: Los Angeles FC 3 Houston Dynamo 3;
LA Galaxy 1 Portland Timbers 2.
Jul 18: Portland Timbers 2 Houston Dynamo 1;
Los Angeles FC 6 LA Galaxy 2.
Jul 23: LA Galaxy 1 Houston Dynamo 1; Los Angeles FC 2 Portland Timbers 2.

Round of 16

Jul 25: Orlando City 1 Montreal Impact 0;
Philadelphia Union 1 New England Revolution 0.
Jul 26: Toronto FC 1 New York City FC 3;
Sporting Kansas City 0(p) Vancouver Whitecaps 0.
Jul 27: San Jose Earthquakes 5 Real Salt Lake 2;
Seattle Sounders 1 Los Angeles FC 4.
Jul 28: Columbus Crew 1 Minnesota United 1(p);
Portland Timbers 1(p) FC Cincinnati 1.

Quarter-Finals

Jul 30: Philadelphia Union 3 Sporting Kansas City 1.
Jul 31: Orlando City 1(p) Los Angeles FC 1.
Aug 1: San Jose Earthquakes 1 Minnesota United 4; New York City FC 1 Portland Timbers 3.

Semi-Finals

Aug 5: Philadelphia Union 1 Portland Timbers 2.
Aug 6: Orlando City 3 Minnesota United 1.

Final

Aug 11: Portland Timbers 2 Orlando City 1.

Internationals

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Matchdays 1-4 (of 6). All games in September to be played behind closed doors.

LEAGUE A

Group A1

Bosnia-Herzegovina, Netherlands, Italy, Poland

Sep 4: Italy v Bosnia-Herzegovina
Sep 4: Netherlands v Poland
Sep 7: Bosnia-Herzegovina v Poland
Sep 7: Netherlands v Italy
Oct 11: Bosnia-Herzegovina v Netherlands
Oct 11: Poland v Italy
Oct 14: Italy v Netherlands
Oct 14: Poland v Bosnia-Herzegovina

Group A2

Belgium, Denmark, England, Iceland

Sep 5: Iceland v England
Sep 5: Denmark v Belgium
Sep 8: Belgium v Iceland
Sep 8: Denmark v England
Oct 11: England v Belgium
Oct 11: Iceland v Denmark
Oct 14: England v Denmark
Oct 14: Iceland v Belgium

Group A3

Croatia, France, Portugal, Sweden

Sep 5: Portugal v Croatia
Sep 5: Sweden v France
Sep 8: France v Croatia
Sep 8: Sweden v Portugal
Oct 11: Croatia v Sweden
Oct 11: France v Portugal
Oct 14: Croatia v France
Oct 14: Portugal v Sweden

Group A4

Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine

Sep 3: Germany v Spain
Sep 3: Ukraine v Switzerland
Sep 6: Spain v Ukraine
Sep 6: Switzerland v Germany
Oct 10: Spain v Switzerland
Oct 10: Ukraine v Germany
Oct 13: Germany v Switzerland
Oct 13: Ukraine v Spain

● *The four group winners will progress to the UEFA Nations League finals. The four bottom teams will be relegated to League B for the 2022-23 edition.*

LEAGUE B

Group B1

Austria, Northern Ireland, Norway, Romania

Sep 4: Norway v Austria
Sep 4: Romania v Northern Ireland
Sep 7: Austria v Romania
Sep 7: Northern Ireland v Norway
Oct 11: Norway v Romania
Oct 11: Northern Ireland v Austria
Oct 14: Norway v Northern Ireland
Oct 14: Romania v Austria

Group B2

Czech Republic, Israel, Scotland, Slovakia

Sep 4: Scotland v Israel
Sep 4: Slovakia v Czech Republic
Sep 7: Czech Republic v Scotland
Sep 7: Israel v Slovakia
Oct 11: Israel v Czech Republic
Oct 11: Scotland v Slovakia
Oct 14: Scotland v Czech Republic
Oct 14: Slovakia v Israel

Group B3

Hungary, Russia, Serbia, Turkey

Sep 3: Russia v Serbia
Sep 3: Turkey v Hungary
Sep 6: Hungary v Russia
Sep 6: Serbia v Turkey
Oct 11: Russia v Turkey
Oct 11: Serbia v Hungary
Oct 14: Russia v Hungary
Oct 14: Turkey v Serbia

Group B4

Bulgaria, Finland, Republic of Ireland, Wales

Sep 3: Bulgaria v Republic of Ireland
Sep 3: Finland v Wales
Sep 6: Wales v Bulgaria
Sep 6: Republic of Ireland v Finland
Oct 11: Republic of Ireland v Wales
Oct 11: Finland v Bulgaria
Oct 14: Finland v Republic of Ireland
Oct 14: Bulgaria v Wales

● *The four group winners will be promoted to League A for the 2022-23 edition. The four bottom teams will be relegated to League C for the 2022-23 edition.*

LEAGUE C

Group C1

Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Montenegro

Sep 5: Azerbaijan v Luxembourg
Sep 5: Cyprus v Montenegro
Sep 8: Cyprus v Azerbaijan
Sep 8: Luxembourg v Montenegro
Oct 10: Luxembourg v Cyprus
Oct 10: Montenegro v Azerbaijan
Oct 13: Azerbaijan v Cyprus
Oct 13: Montenegro v Luxembourg

Group C2

Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, North Macedonia

Sep 5: North Macedonia v Armenia
Sep 5: Estonia v Georgia
Sep 8: Armenia v Estonia
Sep 8: Georgia v North Macedonia
Oct 11: Armenia v Georgia
Oct 11: Estonia v North Macedonia
Oct 14: Estonia v Armenia
Oct 14: North Macedonia v Georgia

Group C3

Greece, Kosovo, Moldova, Slovenia

Sep 3: Moldova v Kosovo
Sep 3: Slovenia v Greece
Sep 6: Slovenia v Moldova
Sep 6: Kosovo v Greece
Oct 11: Greece v Moldova
Oct 11: Kosovo v Slovenia
Oct 14: Greece v Kosovo
Oct 14: Moldova v Slovenia

Group C4

Albania, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Lithuania

Sep 4: Belarus v Albania
Sep 4: Lithuania v Kazakhstan
Sep 7: Kazakhstan v Belarus
Sep 7: Albania v Lithuania
Oct 11: Kazakhstan v Albania
Oct 11: Lithuania v Belarus
Oct 14: Belarus v Kazakhstan
Oct 14: Lithuania v Albania

● *The four group winners will be promoted to League B for the 2022-23 edition. The four bottom teams will enter the relegation play-offs – the two winners will remain in League C for the 2022-23 edition; the two losers will be relegated to League D. But if any of the teams due to play in the relegation play-offs is also due to play in the 2022 World Cup qualifying play-offs, both League C relegation play-offs will be cancelled, and the two teams ranked lowest in the Nations League overall ranking will be relegated to League D.*

LEAGUE D

Group D1

Andorra, Faroe Islands, Latvia, Malta

Sep 3: Faroe Islands v Malta
Sep 3: Latvia v Andorra
Sep 6: Andorra v Faroe Islands
Sep 6: Malta v Latvia
Oct 10: Faroe Islands v Latvia
Oct 10: Andorra v Malta
Oct 13: Faroe Islands v Andorra
Oct 13: Latvia v Malta

Group D2

Gibraltar, Liechtenstein, San Marino

Sep 5: Gibraltar v San Marino
Sep 8: San Marino v Liechtenstein
Oct 10: Liechtenstein v Gibraltar
Oct 13: Liechtenstein v San Marino

● *The two group winners will be promoted to League C for the 2022-23 edition.*

EURO 2020 PLAY-OFFS

Rescheduled play-off ties from March 2020. The two winners from each path will progress to the finals in November.

PATH A

Semi-Finals

Oct 8: Iceland v Romania
Oct 9: Bulgaria v Hungary

PATH B

Semi-Finals

Oct 8: Bosnia-Herzegovina v Northern Ireland
Oct 8: Slovakia v Republic of Ireland

PATH C

Semi-Finals

Oct 8: Scotland v Israel
Oct 8: Norway v Serbia

PATH D

Semi-Finals

Oct 8: Georgia v Belarus
Oct 8: North Macedonia v Kosovo

● *The four overall winners from each path will join the already-qualified 20 nations at Euro 2020 next summer.*

WORLD CUP 2022 QUALIFIERS

ASIA section

● *4.5 finals places available*

Asia's World Cup qualifiers scheduled for October and November 2020 have now been pushed back to 2021. The current standings in the second round are below with 8 matches to be played by each team in total.

Second Round

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Syria	5	5	0	0	14	4	15
China	4	2	1	1	13	2	7
Philippines	5	2	1	2	8	8	7
Maldives	5	2	0	3	6	10	6
Guam	5	0	0	5	2	19	0

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Australia	4	4	0	0	16	1	12
Kuwait	5	3	1	1	17	3	10
Jordan	5	3	1	1	10	2	10
Nepal	5	1	0	4	2	16	3
Chinese Taipei	5	0	0	5	2	25	0

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iraq	5	3	2	0	9	2	11
Bahrain	5	2	3	0	3	1	9
Iran	4	2	0	2	17	3	6
Hong Kong	5	1	2	2	3	5	5
Cambodia	5	0	1	4	1	22	1

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Uzbekistan	5	3	0	2	12	6	9
Saudi Arabia	4	2	2	0	8	4	8
Singapore	5	2	1	2	7	10	7
Yemen	5	1	2	2	6	11	5
Palestine	5	1	1	3	3	5	4

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Qatar	5	4	1	0	11	1	13
Oman	5	4	0	1	11	4	12
Afghanistan	5	1	1	3	2	11	4
India	5	0	3	2	3	5	3
Bangladesh	4	0	1	3	2	8	1

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Japan	4	4	0	0	13	0	12
Kyrgyzstan	5	2	1	2	10	5	7
Tajikistan	5	2	1	2	6	8	7
Myanmar	5	2	0	3	5	13	6
Mongolia	5	1	0	4	2	10	3

Group G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vietnam	5	3	2	0	5	1	11
Malaysia	5	3	0	2	8	6	9
Thailand	5	2	2	1	6	3	8
UAE	4	2	0	2	8	4	6
Indonesia	5	0	0	5	3	16	0

Group H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Turkmenistan	5	3	0	2	8	5	9
South Korea	4	2	2	0	10	0	8
Lebanon	5	2	2	1	5	3	8
North Korea	5	2	2	1	4	3	8
Sri Lanka	5	0	0	5	0	16	0

● *The eight group winners and four best group runners-up advance to the third round of FIFA World Cup qualification as well as qualify for the 2023 Asian Cup. As World Cup 2022 hosts Qatar are guaranteed to finish in first or second place in Group E, the fifth-best runner-up will also progress to the third round of FIFA World Cup qualification.*

AFRICA section

● *5 finals places available*

Africa's World Cup qualifiers scheduled for October 2020 have now been pushed back to May 2021. The group stage draw for the second round of FIFA World Cup qualification is below.

Second Round

Group A

Algeria, Burkina Faso, Niger, Djibouti

Group B

Tunisia, Zambia, Mauritania, Equatorial Guinea

Group C

Nigeria, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Liberia

Group D

Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Mozambique, Malawi

Group E

Mali, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda

Group F

Egypt, Gabon, Libya, Angola

Group G

Ghana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia

Group H

Senegal, Congo, Namibia, Togo

Group I

Morocco, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sudan

Group J

DR Congo, Benin, Madagascar, Tanzania

● *The ten group winners will advance to the third round of FIFA World Cup qualification.*

CONCACAF section

● *3.5 finals places available*

The first round of FIFA World Cup qualification consists of the nations ranked 6th to 35th in the region, with the teams ranked 6th to 11th (El Salvador, Canada, Curacao, Panama, Haiti and Trinidad & Tobago) pre-seeded in each group.

First Round

Group A

El Salvador, Antigua & Barbuda, Grenada, Montserrat, US Virgin Islands

Oct 7: Antigua & Barbuda v Montserrat
Oct 8: El Salvador v Grenada
Oct 10: US Virgin Islands v Antigua & Barbuda
Oct 11: Montserrat v El Salvador
Oct 13: Grenada v US Virgin Islands
Nov 11: Montserrat v US Virgin Islands
Nov 13: Antigua & Barbuda v Grenada
Nov 14: US Virgin Islands v El Salvador
Nov 17: Grenada, Montserrat; El Salvador v Antigua & Barbuda

Group B

Canada, Suriname, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Aruba

Oct 7: Suriname v Cayman Islands
Oct 8: Canada v Bermuda
Oct 10: Aruba v Suriname
Oct 11: Cayman Islands v Canada
Oct 13: Bermuda v Aruba
Nov 11: Cayman Islands v Aruba
Nov 13: Suriname v Bermuda
Nov 14: Aruba v Canada
Nov 17: Canada v Suriname; Bermuda v Cayman Islands

Group C

Curacao, Guatemala, St. Vincent & Grenadines, Cuba, British Virgin Islands

Oct 7: Guatemala v Cuba
Oct 8: Curacao v St. Vincent & Grenadines
Oct 10: British Virgin Islands v Guatemala
Oct 11: Cuba v Curacao
Oct 13: St. Vincent & Grenadines v British Virgin Islands
Nov 11: Cuba v British Virgin Islands
Nov 13: Guatemala v St. Vincent & Grenadines
Nov 14: British Virgin Islands v Curacao
Nov 17: St. Vincent & Grenadines v Cuba; Curacao v Guatemala

Group D

Panama, Dominican Republic, Barbados, Dominica, Anguilla

Oct 7: Dominican Republic v Dominica
Oct 8: Panama v Barbados
Oct 10: Anguilla v Dominican Republic
Oct 11: Dominica v Panama
Oct 13: Barbados v Anguilla
Nov 11: Dominica v Anguilla
Nov 13: Dominican Republic v Barbados
Nov 14: Anguilla v Panama
Nov 17: Panama v Dominican Republic; Barbados v Dominica

Group E

Haiti, Nicaragua, Belize, St. Lucia, Turks & Caicos Islands

Oct 7: Nicaragua v St. Lucia
Oct 8: Haiti v Belize
Oct 10: Turks & Caicos Islands v Nicaragua
Oct 11: St. Lucia v Haiti
Oct 13: Belize v Turks & Caicos Islands
Nov 11: St. Lucia v Turks & Caicos Islands
Nov 13: Nicaragua v Belize
Nov 14: Turks & Caicos Islands v Haiti
Nov 17: Haiti v Nicaragua; Belize v St. Lucia

Group F

Trinidad & Tobago, St. Kitts & Nevis, Guyana, Puerto Rico, Bahamas

Oct 7: St. Kitts & Nevis v Puerto Rico
Oct 8: Trinidad & Tobago v Guyana
Oct 10: Bahamas v St. Kitts & Nevis
Oct 11: Puerto Rico v Trinidad & Tobago
Oct 13: Guyana v Bahamas
Nov 11: Puerto Rico v Bahamas
Nov 13: St. Kitts & Nevis v Guyana
Nov 14: Bahamas v Trinidad & Tobago
Nov 17: Guyana v Puerto Rico; Trinidad & Tobago v St. Kitts & Nevis

● *The six group winners advance to the second round of FIFA World Cup qualification – three home and away play-off ties – to determine the three final teams to join CONCACAF's five highest-ranked nations (Mexico, USA, Costa Rica, Jamaica and Honduras) in the final round.*

EUROPE section

● *13 finals places available*

Europe's FIFA World Cup qualification campaign commences in March 2021. It will comprise ten groups, with each group winner guaranteed a berth at Qatar 2022. The ten group runners-up will advance to the second round (along with the best two Nations League group winners that finished outside the top two of their World Cup qualifying group). The second round will consist of three separate play-off paths, with the three winners also qualifying for the 2022 World Cup.

SOUTH AMERICA section

● *4.5 finals places available*

South America's FIFA World Cup qualification campaign is rescheduled to commence from October 2020 after being originally postponed in March 2020. Matchdays 1-4 (of 18). The qualification format, dates and locations of games are all subject to approval.

Final Group

Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela

Oct 8:
Paraguay v Peru; Uruguay v Chile; Argentina v Ecuador; Colombia v Venezuela; Brazil v Bolivia

Oct 13:
Bolivia v Argentina; Ecuador v Uruguay; Venezuela v Paraguay; Chile v Colombia; Peru v Brazil

Nov 12:
Colombia v Uruguay; Brazil v Venezuela; Bolivia v Ecuador; Argentina v Paraguay; Chile v Peru

Nov 17:
Uruguay v Brazil; Peru v Argentina; Venezuela v Chile; Paraguay v Bolivia; Ecuador v Colombia

● *The top four nations qualify for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, with the fifth-placed team advancing to the inter-confederation play-offs.*

OCEANIA section

● *0.5 finals places available*

Oceania's FIFA World Cup qualification campaign commences in March 2021. It will consist of the first round – single round-robin matches across two groups with the top two teams from each group advancing to the second round. The second round will see the four teams play two-legged home-and-away matches – first a semi-final and then the final, with the winners advancing to the inter-confederation play-offs.

AFCON 2021 QUALIFIERS

Matchdays 3 and 4 that were postponed in March 2020 have now been rescheduled to take place between November 9-17, 2020. The current group standings are below with 6 matches to be played by each team in total.

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guinea	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Mali	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Namibia	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Chad	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Uganda	2	1	1	0	2	0	4
Burkina Faso	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Malawi	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
South Sudan	2	0	0	2	1	3	0

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ghana	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
South Africa	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Sudan	2	1	0	1	4	1	3
Sao Tome & Principe	2	0	0	2	0	5	0

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Gambia	2	1	1	0	5	3	4
Gabon	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
DR Congo	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Angola	2	0	0	2	2	5	0

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco	2	1	1	0	3	0	4
Mauritania	2	1	1	0	2	0	4
Central African Rep	2	1	0	2	2	2	3
Burundi	2	0	0	2	0	5	0

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mozambique	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Cameroon	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Cape Verde	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Rwanda	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Group G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Comoros	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Kenya	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Egypt	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Togo	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

Group H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria	2	2	0	0	6	0	6
Zimbabwe	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Botswana	2	0	1	1	0	1	1
Zambia	2	0	0	2	1	7	0

Group I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Senegal	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Congo	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Guinea-Bissau	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Eswatini	2	0	0	2	1	7	0

Group J

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tunisia	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Libya	2	1	0	1	3	5	3
Tanzania	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Equatorial Guinea	2	0	0	2	1	3	0

Group K

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Madagascar	2	2	0	0	7	2	6
Ethiopia	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Ivory Coast	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Niger	2	0	0	2	2	7	0

Group L

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nigeria	2	2	0	0	6	3	6
Benin	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Lesotho	2	0	1	1	3	5	1
Sierra Leone	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

● *The top two teams in each group qualify for the 2021 Africa Cup Of Nations. If hosts Cameroon finish outside of the top two in Group F, the worst runner-up will not qualify for the tournament.*

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Sellout...Stuttgart had the highest average attendance of any second-tier side in Europe in 2019-20

MERCEDES-BENZ ARENA

Location: Stuttgart, Germany
Team: VfB Stuttgart
Built: 1933
Capacity: 60,441

After a season of second division football – albeit in front of huge 39,500-strong crowds – Stuttgart's impressive home ground will be hosting top-flight Bundesliga games once again following VfB's promotion.

Champions...Real Madrid collect the 1959 European Cup

Originally known as the Adolf-Hitler-Kampfbahn, the stadium has undergone numerous name changes and rebuilding work, before being sponsored by the local car-manufacturing giant in 2008.

Twice a European Cup final venue, the arena has also hosted matches at two World Cup finals, the Euros and seen Stuttgart crowned German champions five times, most recently in 2007.

As well as regularly staging international fixtures for *Die Mannschaft*, the stadium was also home to Stuttgarter Kickers for their two brief spells in the top tier and – before its conversion to a football-specific stadium – several big athletics championships.

Third place...Germany v Portugal in 2006

Training...England during the 2006 World Cup

GREATEST GAMES

1959 June 3 Real Madrid 2-0 Reims

Goals from Enrique Mateos and Alfredo Di Stefano make it four European Cup triumphs in a row for Real Madrid as they beat Reims 2-0 in the final. The ground hosted its second European Cup final 29 years later, with PSV beating Benfica on penalties.

1988 June 12 England 0-1 Republic of Ireland

Ray Houghton scores the only goal of the game as the Republic of Ireland beat England in their opening match at Euro '88. Bobby Robson's side failed to take a point from any of their three at the finals, while Ireland finished third in the group behind the Soviet Union and Netherlands.

2006 July 8 Germany 3-1 Portugal

Then known as the Gottlieb-Daimler-Stadion, Stuttgart's ground hosted the third-place play-off at the 2006 World Cup. A brace from Bastian Schweinsteiger and a Petit own goal was enough to award Germany the Bronze medal, with a late consolation goal from Nuno Gomes.

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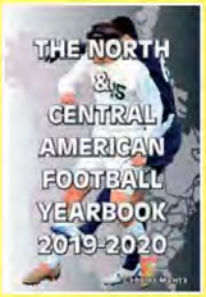

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